

I Know Your Soul Is Not Tainted (Even Though You've Been Told So) by NeroAnne

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Bottom Jonathan, Child Abuse, His coworker "Eric" from s1, It's why Jonathan is so reserved, Jonathan also has a past with a male, Lonnie is scum, M/M, Multi, The Billy-Steve goes into NO detail other than the obvious fact that Billy is STILL an asshole, Top Steve, WHO IS ALSO AN ASSHOLE, mentions of sexual abuse, slowish burn Jonathan/Steve

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington, that last one doesn't last long

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-11

Updated: 2017-12-29

Packaged: 2022-04-03 15:07:16

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con, Underage
Chapters: 10

Words: 49,612

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"You don't know me!" Jonathan yelled, his eyes lit up with his fury and an angry red flush creeping up his pale neck. He didn't seem to realize just how close they were. It was the closest he'd ever gotten to Jonathan without the younger man wincing, Steve realized.

"I know that you think you're disgusting!" Steve shot back, his own anger vibrating in his chest, "I know you think you're dirty and that you don't like to be touched because you think you're tainting people, but you're wrong." His voice softened as he noticed the wetness in Jonathan's eyes. The trembling of his body, his quivering lips, "You're wrong, Jonathan."

Sometimes you need reminding that you are loved. Steve Harrington sets out to remind Jonathan Byers. Slowish burn.

1. It Started With A Photograph

Author's Note:

Disclaimer: Nah.

The Upside Down/Demogorgon/Vanishing of Will Byers/Experiments on Eleven etc didn't happen.

Jane is a normal, happy girl. (Like she deserves to be.) and her nickname is going to be "Eleven" due to her rolling constant 11's in die in the D&D games.

Billy Hargrove is the asshole king of Hawkins.

Nancy cares deeply for her boys but neither has ever been in love with her and she has never been in love with either of them.

Lonnie is a deranged scumbag. In so many ways.

Heed the tags.

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He tried his best to smile at her when she appeared, but with how swollen his bottom lip was, and the already mottled bruise on his left cheek, it looked a lot more like a pained grimace.

Because it *was* a pained grimace.

"Jesus," Nancy Wheeler gasped, reaching out to grab his chin. She turned his head, staring at his cheek and tracing her eyes over his face, "Steve, what in the world?"

"It's nothing," he murmured, moving his face away from her hand slowly, "You should see him, he looks worse."

He didn't.

Nancy frowned, hugging her books tightly to her chest. Her pastel

pink blouse was fucking bright. It kinda hurt his eyes. That could just be the blow to the back of his head from earlier though. “Steve, I really don’t think this relationship you have with Billy is healthy.”

Steve laughed, throwing his arm around her shoulders as he led her to the cafeteria, “No, it’s okay. We do this a lot. It’s sort of a battle for dominance,” he shrugged, “I just lose a lot.”

“You literally sound like a battered wife.”

“Hey,” Steve frowned, “it’s not like that. I hit back, okay?”

Nancy nodded slowly, still unsure. “Um, I have to stop by the library first.” She said, just as they were nearing the lunch room doors.

Steve redirected their steps, turning to the left to bypass the cafeteria, “Why do you need to go to the library?” he asked, glancing down at her.

Nancy pointed to her bag, “Jonathan Byers let me look at his photo album. He has some really sweet pictures of our brothers and their friends and I was picking out which ones I wanted copies of and now I want to return it to him.”

“Jonathan Byers, hm?” Steve thought about the soft-spoken boy. He didn’t ever seem to be around people. Besides Nancy, Steve had never seen the younger boy interact with anyone.

He opened the library door, ushering Nancy inside. It was decorated for Halloween, bright little pumpkin toys scattered around the tables, bookends of black cats with raised spines hugging the blocks of literature, a dark purple cauldron set in the middle of the room with free bookmarks for the taking, and little plastic ghosts hung up on a billboard announcing the date for the Halloween dance and hosting several pictures of banned costumes.

Nancy led them over to the back of the library, poking her head around to look inside of the little reading nook with gentle low lighting. “Jonathan!” she whispered happily, “Hi!”

Steve looked over her head at the boy seated in the alcove. He was holding a book open on his lap, his eyes turned up towards them.

Steve watched as he stood, setting the thick book aside and greeted Nancy with a small smile before looking his way and Steve nodded at him, "Hey, man."

"Hello," Jonathan replied stiffly, staring briefly at the taller boy. He seemed confused as to why Steve was here, which was understandable. The last interaction they had was probably back in his sophomore year, when Steve blurted out that he thought the freshman boy was creepy, which led to Jonathan never even coming close to him if he could help it.

"Here," Nancy fished into her bag, pulling out a thick binder, and offering it to her fellow junior, "Thanks so much! I love the fourth one; Mike's dopey grin is hilarious."

Jonathan smiled softly as he accepted his album, "Eleven's smile as she hugs him makes it the perfect picture." He flipped open the binder, scanning through the pictures to see the ones that Nancy had placed a little sticky note over.

Steve let his eyes peruse some of the pictures. They were really good. Most of them were in black and white, with most of the ones in color being of the kids. A certain one caught his eye and he blinked, "Hey," he reached out to tap the photo.

Jonathan glanced up at him.

"Can I...?" Steve motioned for the photo, smiling awkwardly.

Jonathan hesitated for a few seconds before flipping the binder over, offering it to Steve.

"Thanks," Steve handled the thick album carefully, staring down into the image of Jonathan. In the photograph, he was wearing a long-sleeved black shirt, a size too big with how loose it was. He had his hand up towards the camera, as if trying to shield himself from getting his picture taken. The grin on his lips...wow. Steve hadn't ever seen the other boy smiling so happily. He never even realized...

"You have dimples," Steve said softly, slowly looking up from the picture to stare at Jonathan.

The blonde boy blinked, "What?"

"The way you're smiling here, it shows your dimples," Steve elaborated, grinning lightly, "they're nice. You have a great smile."

"Oh," Jonathan breathed, still looking confused, "T-thanks." He rubbed the back of his head, "I forgot that one was in there. It's... private." He finished, letting his gaze wander to the floor.

"Oh," Steve handed the binder back, "I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"It's fine," Jonathan interrupted, flipping the binder closed slowly. He sent Steve a disarming smile, one without the dimples, and then turned to Nancy, "I'll have those copies for you by this weekend. I have to help Will with his costume."

"Take your time," Nancy chirped, looping her arm around Steve's, "Bye, Jonathan, have a good afternoon."

"You too, Nance," he answered before glancing at Steve, "Um, goodbye."

"Yeah," Steve said, "see you, man." He turned as Nancy did, but glanced over at Byers before they turned the corner. He could see the younger boy opening the binder again, staring down at that photograph...

And running his fingers down that dimpled smile...

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"How's the lip?"

Steve smirked at his boyfriend, shrugging a shoulder, "Swelling is going down, finally. How's the nose?"

Billy Hargrove chuckled, "Stopped bleeding sometime between third and fourth period." His hand squeezed Steve's lightly, gently.

It was a rare moment for Billy to be so soft, but Steve *cherished* when he was. He didn't mind the rough-play, not when he was able to give it back, but there were just sometimes...sometimes when Billy got too

aggressive.

The softness was nice. Sweet.

It was necessary.

"Anyone give you any shit?" Billy asked, already searching his pockets for a cigarette. Steve shook his head, gazing around at the kids walking to their parents cars or towards the bus stop.

"Nancy was upset," Steve mentioned, "but I told her it was okay."

Billy grunted, cupping his hands over his cigarette as he lit it, "That little mousy bitch can just mind her own."

"Hey," Steve snapped, shoving the denim-clad shoulder, "Watch it. She's my friend; you don't talk about her that way."

The shove almost caused the cigarette to fall out of Billy's mouth and he turned to glare at Steve before shoving back, harder, "Fuck out of here, I'll talk about her however the fuck I want."

Steve held his footing, scowling as Billy blew smoke into the air. "You don't always have to be an ass-"

"You're late!" Billy snarled to his step-sister as she came up to the car with her friends trailing behind her. Steve recognized them all, but the smallest one, Will Byers, was nowhere to be seen. Max merely glared at him, picking her skateboard up.

"I'm riding with my friends today," Max told Billy, "Will's older brother is taking us to their house for snacks and then to the arcade."

"You made me wait out here for you for nothing?" Billy sneered, tossing the cigarette in her direction. Max stepped calmly to the side, staring at Billy with unflinching hatred. "What makes you think I'll let you go?" he asked, walking closer to Max.

"Billy," Steve reached out, grabbing his boyfriend's shoulder, "Leave her alone, let's just go."

"Get off of me," Billy jerked his shoulder free, keeping his glare on

Max.

"I called mom already," Max stated, "She said I can go," she smiled innocently, "Your *daddy* also said that you have to give me some change for the games."

"Why you little shit-" Billy reached out to grab her and Steve immediately clamped his fingers over Billy's wrist, dragging him away with a curse.

"Billy, for fucks sake!"

But Billy pushed him again, harder this time, and Steve stumbled back against the car. His head bounced off of the door lightly but it was enough to make the pain from the blow earlier ring.

The open display of aggression stirred Lucas Sinclair into action and he quickly pulled Max away, hiding her behind the shield of himself, Dustin and Mike. Jane "Eleven" Hopper held onto her friend's hand, consoling Max as she shied away from her step brother.

"Hargrove."

Steve watched as Billy turned to stare over at the direction of the voice and he turned bleary eyes to the owner as well.

Jonathan Byers stood a few feet away, his hands shoved into the pockets of his tattered black jacket. Will Byers was hiding behind his older brother's legs, peeking out at them with a nervous look.

Jonathan glanced at Billy and Steve, then to the kids, then gestured them over. "Come on, guys. Those snacks aren't going to make themselves." He waited until all the kids shuffled over to him and then frowned at Billy, "I'll give her some money for the games, don't worry about it."

"Well, I wasn't," Billy hissed, turning to dive into the front seat of his car, "Take the little bitch for all I care." He turned to Steve, "Let's fucking go already."

Steve sighed, his fingers gently rubbing the pain throbbing in his temple. He lifted a hand to Jonathan, waving with a slight smile.

Jonathan lifted one of his own hands, but the frown stayed put on his face until he turned his attention to the kids. "Come on, brats. How was school?" he smiled, walking in the direction of his own car. Immediately, the kids all began to talk, hoping to catch their chaperone's attention with talk of their day.

Steve watched them leave, feeling a small bit upset. It must be nice to have so many young kids look up to a person that much...to feel safe around them.

"Steve," Billy muttered, smacking his hand against the outside of his car door, "get in the damn car already."

"Right," Steve replied, sighing once more as he made his way to the passenger seat.

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"I wish my brother could be like you," Max sighed, popping another pretzel into her mouth and chewing, "You're so cool." She said, seated at the living room with the other kids as they watched Jonathan finish making their snacks.

Jonathan chuckled, shaking his head, "I'm nowhere near cool," he told the redhead, placing a tray of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches onto the table. He moved over to the toaster, catching the Eggo waffles as they popped out. He smeared peanut butter onto the first, grape jelly onto the second, and then smashed them together. He set it onto a separate plate for Jane, throwing in some carrot sticks.

"Thanks, Jonathan," Eleven beamed, her little hands already grabbing at the makeshift sandwich, "I'll eat the carrots, I promise," she said when Jonathan began to protest.

"Okay," Jonathan nodded, winking at her, "remember, it's a promise."

"You *are* cool, Jonathan," Dustin spoke up, the corners of his mouth stained with strawberry jelly, "You're a little bit weird, but still totally cool."

Jonathan smirked, watching Lucas reach out to smack Dustin's hat off

of his head, "Gee, thanks, Dustin." He grabbed a few pretzels, "How many of you need game money?" he asked before shoving a pretzel into his mouth.

Only Max and Will's hands went up and Jonathan nodded, standing up to walk to his room. Once there, he grabbed his satchel, searching through it to find his wallet. "Does the arcade have somewhere to exchange bills into coins?" he called out.

"Yes!" Mike called back and Jonathan nodded to himself, pulling out two five dollar bills. He walked back out the living room, handing one each to Max and Will.

"This is too much," Max argued, her cheeks red as she tried to give back the money, "Mom usually only gives me about two dollars."

Jonathan gently closed her fist over the bill, "Well, now you've got three more," he told her kindly, watching her eyes light up. He felt arms loop around his waist and he instinctively closed an arm over his younger brother.

"Thanks, Jonathan," Will whispered, squeezing him tight.

"Don't mention it," Jonathan replied, handing his brother a sandwich from the tray, "Come on, the sooner you finish eating, the sooner I can get you guys to the arcade."

About an hour and half later, Jonathan was smiling as the back door opened and all the kids rushed out, making their way to the arcade doors, "I'm picking you up in two hours, guys!" it was a good time, he could drop them off at home before dinner.

"Thanks, Jonathan!" Will called back and Jonathan waited, watching as they all entered the building. The smile slipped from his face and he sighed heavily, resting his forehead against the wheel.

They were good kids. So innocent. Like they were meant to be.

Jonathan drove away from the arcade, his tired eyes watching the road as his mind drifted. That picture that Steve had seemed interested in...

God, he hadn't looked at that picture in over a year. He truly forgot it was even in his binder. His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. He remembered looking up in surprise at the sound of his camera, laughing and moving to shield his face.

Let's make the photographer the subject. You're too beautiful to not be in portraits.

Jonathan shook his head, brushing away the memory. He hated that Steve fucking Harrington caused reminded him of that day. Easily, one of the happiest days of his life before it all fell apart...

He thought back to seeing Steve up close again for the first time since his freshman year. He knew that he was around Nancy quite often, but he stuck mostly with Billy Hargrove. His boyfriend.

"Boyfriend," Jonathan murmured thoughtfully to himself, making a left to get to the house. Steve and his boyfriend. The boyfriend who liked to hit Steve. Steve hit back, sure, but it still didn't sit well in his stomach.

Steve's battered face, and the way he had seen Billy push Steve harshly into the car before trying to advance onto Max and the kids, it just didn't make any sense for Harrington to be with someone so cruel.

"It's not my business," Jonathan told himself, parking the car in front of the Byers residence. It didn't sound convincing even saying it aloud and it only made him even more uncomfortable.

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2. The Night Things Began to Change

The music was garbage, but what could be expected from Amy Alderson? She was a timid girl who had never hosted a party and was peer pressured into throwing one after some girls in their grade had realized that her parents had a hot-tub, an air hockey table, and a big yard.

Billy had been invited and by association, Steve, Tommy and Carol as well. So here they were, sitting around the dancing bodies, their hands wrapped around cans of beer and even more littered the grass around them.

“I’m done,” Steve said, shaking his head. Fuck, that was so stupid. What was he thinking? No one ever beat Billy at drinking. His stomach cramped in pain and Steve groaned, sitting down heavily.

“Nice try,” Billy smirked, watching Steve set down his final beer can. He reached over, grabbing it and downing it easily as Carol and Tommy hooted.

“This party sucks,” Billy muttered after he’d finished, chucking the can over the side of the house, “let’s go. I hear that Thomas is also hosting tonight. There might be better booze.” He turned on his heel, clearly expecting them to follow.

“You’re not seriously going to drive,” Steve said, stunned as he watched Carol and Tommy dive into the backseat, where they immediately began to grope one another. He grabbed Billy’s shoulder, “Billy, we just-”

“I’m fine to drive,” Billy grunted, pulling away, “I’m not a lightweight like you and these two twats.” He gestured to the passenger seat. “Get in.”

Steve hesitated, worried, “Billy, this isn’t a good idea.”

“Either you get in or I’m leaving your ass here,” Billy warned as he opened the driver’s side door. He stared expectantly at his boyfriend and Steve sighed, opening the passenger side door and climbing in.

They'd only been driving for around ten minutes when Tommy suddenly leaned over and dared Billy to dive as fast as he could. The road was empty, but that could all change at any given moment. The speed at which the car was driving was making Steve's vision blur and he gasped as Billy lifted his hands from the wheel, rolling down the window to holler out at the night.

"Billy, stop!" Steve yelled, reaching over to grab the wheel. He felt Tommy's hands reach out to grab his shoulders and pull him back against the seat and he struggled, yelling at his boyfriend all the while.

The car jerked to a sudden stop and Steve cried out as he was released, his face smacking into the dashboard. His eyes watered in pain as his temple cracked against it and he immediately felt the skin around the area break.

"Billy, you are such a fucking idiot! I'm sick of your shit!"

His head swimming, he heard the sound of his car door being opened before he was pulled out, his jacket snatched in a tight grip. Steve found himself face to face with his snarling boyfriend but he was too out of it to even glare back.

"Well, if that's how you feel," Billy snarled as he shoved Steve onto the dirt, "Have fun finding your way home with that blood in your eye." He turned and stepping back into his car, yanking the door closed roughly and raced off, tired screeching and the sound of Tommy and Carol cackling in the backseat echoing around Steve's head.

Steve stood up slowly, the pain in his head causing him to stumble twice. He panted hard, staring down the dark road. "Fucking asshole!" he screamed, even though his now ex-boyfriend's Camaro was already out of sight.

Steve brought a hand up to his eye and he groaned as felt the sticky fluid coat his fingertips. "Shit," he walked slowly down the road, his entire body feeling too heavy to keep upright for too long. He was far from home, he knew this. He just needed to find a street sign in order to know just how far he really was.

It took him about ten minutes to finally find a damn sign and by that time, he was feeling extremely light-headed. He stared blearily at the sign, trying to make out the letters. It was too dark...or was that his vision just fading?

“Mirk,” Steve mumbled to himself as he tried to read the sign, “Mirk....something...” he stumbled, falling onto one knee. From down the road, he could hear the sound of tires and he tried hard to lift himself back up as headlights suddenly illuminated the area.

Steve groaned, crashing onto his side. *Shouldn't have challenged Billy to that drinking contest.* He heard the car screech to a halt, and the sound of the car door opening before footsteps were rushing his way.

“Hey, do you need help?” an alarmed-sounding voice called and Steve gurgled in response, lifting his head as much as he was able to. “Harrington?” the voice was clearly confused.

“W-who?” Steve whispered, blinking his eyes open. From where he was sprawled, the light from the car shot past his body to glint up the sign. Oh.

“Mirkwood,” he sighed, letting his head fall back gently against the cold asphalt.

“Steve?” the voice again. It was soft, gentle. “Steve, are you okay? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Steve murmured, eyes slowly closing. “Can...hear...”

“I’m going to move you, okay? Try to swing your arm around me.” Gentle hands grabbed his denim-covered forearms and Steve felt himself being pulled up. The person was struggling a bit and Steve grunted as he used the last bit of his strength to push himself up. He threw an arm around tense shoulders, leaning heavily against the boy.

It was definitely another male. Even though Steve could feel their significant height difference-seriously he had to have at least three inches on the guy- he knew it was a male due to the way he was able to bear Steve’s weight and the feel of him.

“Who?” Steve repeated, turning his head to observe his helper. Even with the light from the car, Steve couldn’t really tell who he was looking at. The voice sounded a bit familiar but no one he could place at the moment.

“Shh,” the voice murmured, “I’ll take you home-”

“No!” Steve interrupted loudly and then grimaced in pain as his head throbbed with his own yelling. He could feel that stupid cut leak even more blood into his eye and he shut them tight, groaning, “Not... home. P-parents...can’t see.”

“Okay,” the voice whispered, and Steve heard the car door open again. It took some time to move him into an upright position but Steve heard the male exhale loudly as he reached for the seatbelt to buckle him in. Within a few seconds, the mysterious helper had moved to the driver’s side and started the car. The little light above their heads was flicked on, painting the inside of the car a diluted yellow.

“What happened, Steve?”

God, the voice was so fucking soft and quiet. Nothing at all like Carol’s obnoxious tinder, Tommy’s annoying pitch or Billy’s brash barking voice.

“Harrington?”

Oh, right. The soft voice had asked a question.

Steve mumbled a reply and then his eyes began to close. He could hear his name being called out again and he turned his head just slightly, peering into the yellow tinge.

He was out soon after, but he had seen brown eyes glancing at him anxiously.

Pretty brown eyes.

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“I’m sorry, Jonathan, but I can’t leave the kids alone.”

“Did you not hear me?” Jonathan hissed into the phone, glancing over at his room. The door was still closed about half-way, and Jonathan could see those long, black denim covered legs dangling off the edge of his bed. “Steve *fucking* Harrington is sleeping on my bed with blood running down his face. I need you, Nancy, please!”

“I have a living room full of kids, Jonathan! Your brother and my baby sister included. I can’t just walk out of here and go to your house.”

“But Nancy,” Jonathan murmured, placing his forehead against the wall besides the phone, “What the hell do I do?”

“Just be there for him, Jonathan. Let him sober up a little, clean him up, and then take him home.” the sound of music being turned up too loud caused Jonathan to wince and move the phone away from his head, the chord dangling in the air. *“Holly! No, put that down! I have to go, Jonathan. Good luck!”*

“Wait-!”

The sound of the dial tone caused Jonathan to curse and he hung up, turning to stare at his door and chewing his lips. “Great.” He shrugged off his gray hoodie, hanging it up on the hook near the door and made his way to the kitchen, grabbing a white dish towel. He chucked it into the sink, turning the knob for the warm water to run and he watched the towel soak.

He was so glad that Will had begged earlier to go to a sleepover at Mike’s and that their mother decided to finally go out on a date with Chief Hopper. Explaining the inebriated and bleeding boy on his bed was not something Jonathan figured would go over well.

He rinsed the towel and turned to walk down to his room. Pushing the door open quietly, he poked his head into the room and could see Steve snoring away on his bed. Snorting, Jonathan walked over to the other boy and kneeled down beside the bed.

He gripped the towel tightly and exhaled slowly. “You won’t be touching his skin,” he told himself quietly, “just use the towel, you don’t have touch his face.”

Gently, he ran the damp towel over the boy's face, cleaning up the blood around his temple. He trailed the towel lower, collecting the dried blood from Steve's eye, cheek and then lower still to his jaw.

Steve had a fucking nice jaw-line. Steve had a fucking nice *everything*, really.

Jonathan felt his cheeks warm as he pulled the bloodied towel away to observe the older boy. His eyebrows were so dark and full, easily visible due to his bangs being brushed back to expose his forehead. His nose was slightly too big for his face but it didn't take away from his attractiveness, it actually *enhanced* how good looking he was. Which was fucking unfair because that couldn't be said for just anyone, Steve was a huge exception.

Jonathan sat back on his knees, sighing. He remembered the first time he noticed the older boy was good-looking. He was on his way to meet Nancy at her locker, hoping that she could give him advice for a photo album he was going to gift to his mom for her birthday.

Jonathan turned the corner and blinked.

Steve Harrington was beside Nancy, laughing with her about something. He reached up to swipe his big hand through his bangs, brushing them away. His eyes were so expressive, so alive. Fuck, he was so attractive.

Tommy H. and Carol were right beside him, looking bored but putting up with Nancy anyway. Jonathan didn't care for those two.

He watched as Steve said something to Nancy again and she giggled, turning her head.

Jonathan moved when noticed him and waved him over. He went, greeting her brightly. He then looked to Steve, offering a shy smile.

"Woah, Nancy, I didn't know you were friends with this creepy kid." Steve remarked and then he winced in pain as she reached up to smack his forehead.

Jonathan paled and quickly looked away from those dark eyes, stammering a quick, "I'll see you later," to Nancy and shuffling away, head down as he heard the laughter from Steve's friends following behind

him.

A soft groan caused Jonathan's spine to stiffen and he glanced up, seeing dark brown eyes blink open sluggishly.

"Where the fuck...?" Steve rasped, sitting up slowly. Jonathan watched as he looked around the room, confused. When he finally looked his way, Jonathan quickly ripped his gaze away, staring over at his Evil Dead poster instead.

"Byers?" Steve murmured, bringing a hand up to his temple. "What are you..." he trailed off, and out of the corner of his eyes, Jonathan could see him looking around the room again. "The soft voice," he murmured and Jonathan turned to look at him, confused.

"What?"

"You helped me," Steve said, pointing at Jonathan, "You...you picked me up after Billy left me out on the road. Mirkwood."

"Your *boyfriend* left you out there?" Jonathan asked, eyes wide, "Drunk and bleeding?" he smiled grimly, shaking his head, "You sure know how to pick a guy, Harrington."

"He's not always like that-" Steve frowned. "No, you know what? Fuck that. He's always that way and he can go fuck himself." And still, he felt a little sad. Billy was his first. He'd realized he was attracted to men starting with Billy but it always felt so...cold. And empty.

Jonathan seemed to notice his feeling. "You...could do a lot better than him," he offered, voice small. "You're not a bad looking guy and you...you deserve better than Hargrove as a boyfriend."

Steve blinked, his head slowly nodding. "Yeah," he agreed, "yeah. Thanks, Byers." It was truly it then. Him and Billy. Done.

"He's not my boyfriend anymore," Steve mumbled, nodding to himself. "Been meaning to end it for a while now." He ran a hand over his temple, making a soft noise of surprise, "it's not sticky anymore." He looked to Jonathan.

“Uh, yeah,” Jonathan held up the dirty towel, “I cleaned you up a little.” He sighed, “I’m sorry for touching you while you were sleeping but if would have caked on there a lot more if I didn’t wipe it off,” he stood, looking anywhere but Steve’s face, “There will be some water and an aspirin in the kitchen but you might want to throw up first...get whatever you drank tonight out of your system.”

Before Steve could say anything, Jonathan walked out of his room, shutting the door behind him quietly. He sighed, making his way over the kitchen. He filled up a glass with tap water and then rummaged around for his mother’s ibuprofen.

Once he found them, he set two pills aside along with the water, and then turned back to the fridge. He pulled out a jar of jelly and then opened the pantry door to grab the peanut butter before making his way to the bread box.

He had just begun to smear the jelly onto the first piece of bread when he heard his door being opened and hurried footsteps rushing to the bathroom. He cringed, listening to the gurgled sounds of vomiting, and then glanced behind his shoulder once they were done.

“T-there’s an extra toothbrush inside the drawer,” Jonathan called out, “it’s blue, got a white handle.” He looked back down the bread, grabbing the peanut butter, “there’s also mouthwash.”

He listened to sound of water running and quickly finished the sandwich, setting it onto a paper plate before carrying it to the living room. He turned on the television, flipping to a random channel, and then sat down, putting the plate with the prepared sandwich, the glass of water, and pills onto the coffee table.

A few minutes later, Steve slumped down next to him, groaning quietly. Jonathan kept his eyes on the television, staring at the horror movie playing, before pointing to the sandwich. “That’s for you. The pills and water too-”

“Jesus, thanks so much,” Steve said in a hurry, lunging forward to grab the sandwich. He took a big bite, moaning in relief.

Jonathan fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. “I...I’m surprised you

have an appetite.”

“I didn’t drink that much,” Steve replied, chewing slowly, “but what I did drink was taken down on an empty stomach and way too fast. I was trying to beat Billy in a game.” He snorted, “I don’t even like drinking games.”

Jonathan narrowed his eyes at the screen, confused, “Then why play?”

Steve paused mid-chew. “...I don’t know.”

Jonathan nodded. “Okay. Well, as soon as you finish, I can get you home. You don’t seem too bad now that you’ve slept for a while.”

“A while? What time is it?”

Jonathan glanced down at his cheap wrist-watch. “It’s twenty after midnight. It was just before eleven when I found you over on Mirkwood.”

“Oh.”

They were silent for a few minutes and then Jonathan startled when a hand landed on his thigh and squeezed gently. Steve Harrington was touching him.

He’s not touching your skin, he’s fine.

He’s fine.

He’s fine.

“Byers, thank you,” Steve said quietly, “I don’t know how this night would have ended if you hadn’t helped me,” he paused for just a second, “I know it’s asking a lot but can...can I stay here tonight?”

Jonathan paused his inner-mantra and turned to stare at him, stunned.

“Look, I don’t have the keys to my place.” He frowned, “and if I risk waking up my parents and they see me this way, I’ll never hear the

end of it. They're going to some conference in Indianapolis in the morning so I was hoping that you could just take me over once they're gone?"

Jonathan swallowed hard. God damn it.

"I'll sleep on the floor," Jonathan muttered, "Just don't puke on me if you feel sick at night." His cheeks warmed as Steve's arms wrapped around his shoulders. He could smell the older man's expensive cologne, the lingering scent of cigarette smoke.

But his cheek was way too close to Jonathan's face for him to linger on Steve's nice smell.

"I owe you so big!" Steve announced as he pulled away from the hug, finishing his sandwich in two more bites. He reached over to grab the glass of water and pills, popping them into his mouth and taking drinking the entire glass of water.

"Don't worry about it," Jonathan said, standing quickly as he took Steve's glass, making his way over to the sink to fill it. "You can go back to bed if you want, I'll be in as soon as I shut the lights off."

"Sure, man." Jonathan head him say before he walked back to the room. Jonathan did his round about the house, making sure the door was locked, the lights were all off, and then made his way to his kitchen to refill the glass.

For a moment, he wondered if his mother would stay with the Chief tonight and then he grimaced at the idea of what they would possibly do all night.

Walking into his room, he placed the full glass of water onto his nightstand besides Steve's head and then went over to his closet. He rummaged around, grabbing an extra blanket, and then tossed it onto the floor, spreading it around.

"You can just come up here, you know," Steve told him, shrugging off his denim jacket, "it's your bed...and if we lie on our sides, there will be enough room."

"It's fine," Jonathan mumbled, grabbing a pillow from the bed and

setting it down. He laid down, already feeling his spine protest at the uncomfortable position.

“I don’t have cooties,” Steve joked, poking his head over the bed to stare at Jonathan, eyes soft, “What are you so scared of?”

Annoyed and unfamiliar with how playful and easy-going the older boy was being, Jonathan snapped back, “I don’t want to *creep* you out, Harrington. Just go to sleep.” He turned away from Steve, curling an arm under the pillow.

“I’m sorry,” he heard Steve whispered quietly. “Goodnight, Byers.”

“Night,” Jonathan said flatly, closing his eyes tightly.

He hoped morning would come quick.

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Notes for the Chapter:

I was NOT going to write adorable Harringrove scenes. No way. Steve has put up with Billy's shit way too long and he's rid of him now. It seems like a hurried decision but this fic won't be very long. At most 12 chapters.

I'm glad you all like it!

3. I Became more Aware of You

Notes for the Chapter:

You guys.

The love you've shown this story is ridiculous and I am not worthy and thanks so much. Seriously. You all make me want to write this ship forever. <3

Byers was curled up on his side, one arm underneath the pillow supporting his head, and the other tucked close to his chest with his hand fisted beside his cheek. His breaths were slow and even, the material of his black, long-sleeved tee had bunched up around his waist a bit, revealing a slip of pale skin before the denim of his jeans took over to hide the lower half of his hip-dents.

Steve blinked, head tilting slightly. Shit, he'd never seen Byers this way. He looked so peaceful, so soft. Glancing around the room, Steve moved to sit up and then pressed a hand to his temple, groaning slightly in pain. Thankfully, the food and aspirin had helped last night and it wasn't as bad as it honestly would be.

He frowned, smoothing his palms down the bed as he let his body fall back onto the soft sheets. Fucking Billy leaving him out there alone like that. It was as if he didn't care about what could happen to Steve.

It was most likely because he really didn't. Behind the sex and cigarette smoke, he knew that he didn't care for Billy much, with the feeling being obviously mutual. Being with Hargrove was exciting at times, but it was misery more often than not.

"It's over now," he murmured to himself, relieved. He should have left the asshole too long ago. Steve turned over again, looking down at Jonathan. He jerked back in surprise when brown eyes blinked sleepily up at him.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan asked, voice husky from sleep. He pushed himself up onto one arm, "Do you need to throw up?"

“No, I just-” Steve shook his head, smiling slightly, “you freaked me out a little. I thought you were still sleeping.”

Jonathan frowned at the words and then pushed himself into a sitting position, sweeping back his blonde fringe, “Right. Well, mind getting ready? I have to work later today and I told my mom I would pick up my brother from his sleepover. We’re supposed to work on his costume.”

Ah, right. Halloween was next weekend.

“I was wondering where the little guy was,” Steve said, sitting up slowly. When his head didn’t immediately throb in pain, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, “Why were you alone tonight?”

“Mom had a date, I’m pretty sure she slept over,” Jonathan replied, fixing the hem of his shirt. “I was supposed to be at work until a little after midnight but I left early.” He sighed, “Something happened and I didn’t want to be there anymore.” He didn’t give Steve a chance to ask, “Besides, it was really slow.”

Steve nodded, “Half the school was at Amy’s party and the other half was at Thomas’s.”

“I don’t know who they are.” Jonathan shrugged.

“That’s not surprising to me.” Steve grinned, “Do you know anyone in school besides Nancy?” He was being playful, but the way Jonathan’s shoulders sagged and with how his brown eyes lost their already tiny light, Steve could tell his words hit home. And he felt like a dick.

“Hey, I didn’t mean-”

“I’ll make breakfast,” Jonathan interrupted, standing up and avoiding Steve’s eyes, “I’m taking you home after that so...” he nodded awkwardly, pointing to the door, “I’ll be out there. Feel free to use the bathroom after me.”

Steve watched him go and he stared down at Jonathan’s floor. He heard the water running in the bathroom and he frowned. Byers never looked at him when he spoke. Never directly into his gaze. The sound of the water being shut off in the bathroom followed by

footsteps echoing down to the kitchen met his ears.

Why did Jonathan never look into his eyes? Did Steve make him nervous? He stood, grabbing his denim jacket and tossing it over his shoulder.

He stopped by the bathroom, cringing as he caught sight of his reflection. His hair, bed-mussed and lacking its morning spray, was floppier than usual, curling down around his ears. His temple was bruised and there was an angry red cut in the center of the bruise but it didn't look too bad.

"Hey."

Steve jumped, looking away from the mirror and over to Jonathan.

Jonathan's hair was sleep-mussed also. But it looked *good*. The blonde fringe was side-swept away from his eyes. Eyes that were not fucking looking his way, Steve couldn't help but notice.

"What are you drinking?" Jonathan murmured, "We've got coffee, juice, milk," he listed, nonchalantly playing with the wrist-cuff of his black sleeve.

"Oh, uh, juice is fine." Steve replied. He raised a brow, "You drink coffee?"

Jonathan nodded, "I don't sleep much," he said quietly as he turned away, "coffee helps."

Steve thought about his words, turning back to the sink. He grabbed the toothbrush he had used last night and repeated the mundane process, slowly walking to the kitchen once he was done. He stared at the plate of food on the table, eyes wide.

"Jesus Christ, Byers. Some toast and juice would have sufficed."

How Byers had managed to make sunny-side up eggs, buttered toast, *and* bacon in such a short amount of time was a mystery. He turned his head, seeing Jonathan set his own plate down across from the one already on the table.

"I'm good at breakfast," was all Jonathan replied with, grabbing his fork and poking the egg yolk. Steve quickly took his own seat, mimicking Jonathan's motion, and he watched with wide eyes as the runny yolk smeared his plate.

"That was fantastic," Steve moaned after he'd finished, setting the plate in the sink. He heard Jonathan laugh and decided he really liked the sound of it. "I'm serious. You cook really good."

"Really well," the other boy corrected, "I'm glad you liked it," Jonathan said as he placed his own plate in the sink. "I'll just wash these and we can go."

Time went by too fast. Even though he didn't say much, or anything at all, during the ride to his house, Steve enjoyed talking to Jonathan. The younger man would listen patiently and either nod or hum in time with his questions.

God, all Billy would ever do is tell him to shut up or shut him up via smoke-stained kisses. It was nice to actually be heard.

"Anyway, they're always leaving so I don't really eat breakfast like that," Steve finished, "I usually scarf down a bagel or something easy before school." He looked up at his big house and sighed, "Home sweet home." He turned back to Jonathan, who was staring at the windshield.

Steve needed to express his gratitude somehow, so he resorted to the only way he knew how to.

"Can I pay for your gas?"

He watched Jonathan's head shake and he rolled his eyes, "Come on, Byers. It's the least I could do after you saved my ass and fed me."

"I'd rather you didn't," Jonathan replied, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

Steve glared at him and then reached into his pocket anyway. He made a show out of it, grunting and growling as he dug in his jeans, hoping Byers would look over at him. It worked. Jonathan was staring at him as if he had rabies.

Grinning, Steve reached into his wallet and pulled out two twenty's, holding them out to Jonathan. "Here."

"No, Harrington," Jonathan muttered, ripping his gaze away. Damn it.

"Byers," Steve said, exasperated, "take the damn money."

"No."

"*Take it* or I'm grabbing your hand and forcing you to," Steve threatened. He watched Jonathan flinch at the tone and words and Steve sighed, "Jonathan," he whispered, "please just take the money."

He watched as Byers bit his bottom lip before he looked his way. "Just leave it on the seat," he relented.

"What?" Steve blinked, "I'm literally handing it to you, Byers, just grab it-"

"You wanted me to accept it, fine, but just leave it on the seat." Jonathan said tightly. "Otherwise put it back in your ugly wallet."

Steve gaped, "My wallet isn't ugly!" he looked at it, turning it over. Okay, so it was a pretty grotesque mustard color with a horizontal black line. But it had been a gift from some uncle he didn't even remember, damn it.

Jonathan snorted, tapping his thumb impatiently on the steering wheel, "Come on, Harrington. I've got to pick up my brother."

"Alright," Steve sighed, opening the door. He leaned over, dropping the twenties onto the seat before he straightened and closed the door. He leaned into the window, smiling at Jonathan, "See you around?"

Jonathan glanced at him and Steve smiled wider, hopeful.

"...Maybe," Jonathan said softly, a small nod following his words.

"I'm holding you to that!" Steve informed him and he faltered when Jonathan turned to stare at him. He still didn't look into his eyes, but

it was good enough.

"I know you will," Jonathan smiled, just a tiny one, but it made Steve incredibly happy.

Why? He didn't have a clue.

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"He's in the break-room."

Jonathan glanced over his locker at his boss. He licked his lips, "Huh?" he said, shoving his bag into the small compartment. He ran his hands down his vest, smoothing out any wrinkles.

"Eric," the tall man informed him, a wry smile on his thin lips, "He's in the break-room and he'll be cleaning the right side today so you don't have to worry about avoiding him."

"I'm not avoiding him," Jonathan denied, "I just...I get more done when he's not around."

"Right," his boss said, a frown on his face. "Listen, Jonathan, if you don't want to work--"

"Please don't fire me," Jonathan said quickly, eyes wide as he clenched his fists, "I-I'll try harder, I'll stay later, I'll clean every bathroom by myself just...just don't let me go. I need this job."

His boss looked stunned. "Son, all I was going to suggest was that you change your hours. Maybe start working as soon as he's gone and work the closing shift." He smiled a bit, "you're the best worker I have, and I wouldn't fire you."

Jonathan's shoulder lost their tension and he sighed in relief, lips quirking, "Thank you," he said sincerely, "Okay, yeah. I'll uh talk to Jenny about my hours before I leave tonight." He nodded, smiling at his boss.

"Good," the man smiled back, turning around, "Take care of the bathrooms on the left side first and then when you're done, the podium is all set up. Handle ticket taking for the first half and then

do the theater rounds after, we're closing early again." He looked miffed, "Theater has been mostly empty all night."

"Got it," Jonathan watched him leave and he slumped against his locker, mentally drained. He'd picked up only Will not too long ago, the younger boy telling him all about the sleepover. They'd gotten home to their mother and Jim sharing a goodbye kiss, Will immediately cat-calling from Jonathan's car.

In between taking down Will's measurements and sewing fabric for his costume, Joyce told them about her date, and Jonathan was overjoyed with how happy his mother seemed. She deserved happiness. Will was also pleased, his playful, "So is Eleven going to be our sister?" question casing their mom's cheeks to turn rosy and Jonathan to accidentally prick his finger with a needle as he laughed with his younger brother.

After eating lunch with his family, he had just enough time to shower, grab his uniform, peck his mother on the cheek and rush out the door, promising his mother that he wouldn't speed and that he would try to eat something as soon as he got off of work.

Now that he was actually at work, all he wanted was for time to go by quickly.

He'd just gotten to the podium when he heard Eric's voice saying goodnight to their boss. He squared his shoulders, looking away from the man as he turned his way. He remembered the first time they actually spoke to one another...

Eric sat down heavily with a groan, "Five up to eight is clean." He rubbed the back of his neck, a look of open disgust on his face, "I think the kids in this town literally come to the theater just to have sex."

Jonathan smiled timidly, glancing shyly up at the man. He had to be talking to him. No one else was in the break-room; the employees worked the early morning and noon shifts or were handling concession. "Some do. I've heard talk that theater sex is pretty mind-blowing."

Eric grinned lazily, "Yeah? Is that what you kids call mind-blowing?" he leaned onto his forearms, staring into Jonathan's eyes, "Ever done it?"

Jonathan's cheeks colored. "N-no. It's just something I heard in the hallways." He nervously licked his lips, and glanced towards his album again. He stilled when long fingers reached over to tap on one photograph.

"That's cool," Eric stated, his head craned awkwardly to look at the picture of the setting sun with a shadowed tree in the foreground. "You take that?"

Jonathan nodded, nibbling on his lower lip. "It's a hobby," he murmured, turning the album over and pushing it slowly towards Eric.

Eric took it with careful hands, humming softly as he gazed through the photos. "Wow, these are terrific. You are talented."

"Not much to it," Jonathan shrugged, "Just point and take the shot," he smiled, "but thank you." He closed the book gently as Eric handed it back.

"We've been working together for nearly six months and we've never really talked, have we?" Eric mentioned before he held out his hand, "Eric Mortensen."

"Jonathan Byers," Jonathan replied, slipping his hand into Eric's. He had big hands, Jonathan noticed.

"How old are you?" Eric asked, pulling his hand back to rest his chin on after, "Fifteen?"

"Sixteen," Jonathan corrected. He tilted his head. "You? Twenty?"

Eric's lips quirked, "Twenty two."

Jonathan nodded, smiling lightly, "It's nice to meet you."

He hated remembering. He hated thinking back on the moment he met the bastard. Jonathan willed himself to not run away to the bathroom to hide as Eric walked past him, leaving the theater through the back.

He took a deep breath, bringing a shaky hand up to his neck. He jumped when he was greeted by a movie-goer and he turned his head, accepting their tickets and telling them to enjoy the film.

And so his first few hours went, taking tickets slowly and sleepily. It would sometimes take up to about an hour for anyone to come up to him and he silently mulled over how empty the theater seemed to be these days. He was still thinking about it when a voice called out to him and Jonathan startled, slipping the fake grin onto his face and moving to accept the person's ticket, when he noticed who it was.

Steve Harrington and Nancy Wheeler looked pleasantly surprised to see him. Jonathan wished he could feel the same.

"Nice uniform, Byers," Steve teased, "You honestly look super adorable." He reached out, and Jonathan flinched, eyes narrowing as Steve flicked his thumb against the name tag pinned to his vest before he offered up his ticket with a dopey grin.

Snorting at Steve, he took the offered ticket, ripping it slightly before handing it back to him. "Enjoy the movie," he muttered, hoping to God that Steve would just go to his movie like a normal person.

Of course he didn't.

"When are you off?" Steve asked excitedly, stuffing the ticket into his pocket. "We should hang out!"

"Not till nine," Jonathan said, grabbing Nancy's ticket. He smiled at her as he ripped it, hanging it back. "Enjoy the movie, Nance."

She smiled prettily back at him but Steve pouted.

"Hey, how come she got a smile? I want a smile, Byers." Steve pressed, leaning over the podium to try and stare into Jonathan's eyes.

"You're a child," Jonathan said, but his lips formed a smile anyway and he watched as Steve grinned brightly back at him from the corner of his eye. "Shouldn't you be recovering after last night?"

"I feel fine," Steve protested, "All I did once you dropped me off was sleep and I was bored of being home alone." He sighed, "Besides, I knew Billy would want to come over at some point so I dragged Wheeler out on a date." He stared hard at the blonde, "So you want to hang out tonight?" he demanded.

"Can't you see me working?" Jonathan shot back, tapping his finger against the podium just for something to take his mind off of Steve's stupidly charming face.

"Our movie ends at nine-fifteen," Nancy pointed out, "Do you want to grab some food after, Jonathan?" she asked hopefully and Jonathan frowned, staring down at his hands. Shit. He'd been ditching her too many times and he felt horrible about it.

He considered the invitation and sighed, sweeping his bangs away from his face. He was so fucking tired of being afraid to be around people. To be afraid of dirtying them. But he didn't have to touch them...he could keep his hands to himself and hang out with them. He couldn't taint them just by hanging out with them...could he?

"Byers?"

Jonathan looked back to Steve, who was watching him with the widest eyes full of hope he'd ever seen.

"...Sure," Jonathan decided, looking away as Steve crowed in happiness, pumping a fist into the air. His cheeks reddened, and he was glad the theater was mostly empty. "I'll see you after your movie."

"This is going to be great," Steve exclaimed, offering his arm to Nancy as he led her past Jonathan, "Jonathan Byers! Out to eat with us, Nance! With *me*!"

Jonathan chuckled, turning back as another couple came up to him, their tickets in hand. He smiled at them, the expression no longer fake, as he told them to enjoy their movie.

He couldn't remember the last time he genuinely felt this excited.

--

"Just give me five minutes to go grab my stuff and talk to my boss's attendant," Jonathan said, pulling off his name tag. The vest went next, Steve watching as Jonathan slipped it off of his shoulders, the white shirt he wore underneath gleaming in the light.

"Nah, I think you should keep the vest," Steve winked, "It suits you." He leered, waggling his eyebrows playfully and absolutely delighting in the color that spread across Jonathan's nose.

"Bite me, Harrington," Jonathan turned on his heel, whipping the vest over his shoulder and walking behind a door labeled STAFF ONLY.

"I can't believe he's coming with us," Nancy told Steve once the door closed and he turned to her, "He never agrees to hang out!" she smiled, her hands slipping into the pocket of her hooded sweatshirt.

"Not even with you?" Steve asked, "Aren't you his only friend?"

"I am," Nancy nodded, smile fading, "but he never wants to do anything anymore. We used to hang out a lot last year," she was frowning now, "he...he doesn't even hug me anymore. I didn't notice until just recently but he doesn't even try to touch me anymore. Anytime I get too close, he shies away."

"Maybe he likes you," Steve offered. The idea left a bitter taste in his mouth. He reached into his jacket to pull out his packet of gum, offering a piece to Nancy, who declined, and popping it into his mouth to get rid of the bitterness.

"No," Nancy shook her head slowly, "He's not into girls."

"Byers is bent?" Steve almost swallowed his gum. Sure, he'd suspected but to have it confirmed? Fantastic.

"Couldn't you tell?"

"I've never been around him long enough to notice," Steve murmured, lying only a little, "I just...I haven't ever seen him around guys. Well, I've never seen him around anyone, actually."

"Well, he's definitely not into me," Nancy confirmed, "I just wish I knew why he changed so much. He used to be happier." She bit her bottom lip, "I can't believe I didn't notice how he's changed. I feel like a bad friend."

"Hey," Steve wrapped an arm around her shoulders, "Stop it. You

said yourself that he just hasn't been around you as often. How can you notice when he's never around?" he sighed, "thinking back on it, maybe he's like this because I called him creepy years ago."

"That was mean," Nancy nodded, "but no...he started changing way after that." She glanced around the theater, "He changed after he started working here."

"So he hates his job-"

"Well, yes," Jonathan said as he walked right back out of the door. He hadn't seemed to have heard the earlier conversation, for which Steve was grateful. "You try working in a theater, it sucks."

"Bet you reek of buttered popcorn all the time," Steve laughed at the dry glare he received.

"If I stink so badly to you then maybe I'll just go home."

"Relax, Byers, it was a joke." Steve moved to clap Jonathan on the shoulder and he paused when Jonathan immediately took a step back. "Okay, then. No touching. Got it." He looked back to Nancy, who glanced back at him nervously.

"So, we going or what?" Jonathan muttered, already walking away from them, his fingers opening the top buttons of his work shirt.

They wound up at some restaurant, Steve and Nancy sitting side-by-side with Jonathan across from them. They'd eaten burgers and fries, had actually talked and laughed with *Jonathan Byers* and they were having fun.

"I can't believe they picked Ghostbusters," Steve laughed, his arm thrown lazily over the bench, "that's fucking cool. I love it." He tilted his head, "So, if the four of them are going for the theme, what are Eleven and Max going to be?"

"Max is probably going to be something scary," Jonathan said, smiling softly, "that girl is a tough one. Can you imagine? Having to live with Billy Hargrove-" he trailed off, glancing at Steve when the older male snorted. "Shit, sorry."

Steve waved a hand, "Don't apologize," he said seriously, "I was agreeing with you. Billy is an asshole. I've always known it but I just kept hoping to find a silver-lining."

"I think Eleven wants to be a ghost," Nancy piped in. "Like a sheet over the body kind of ghost, which is completely adorable."

"Yeah, Hopper was telling my mom that she's excited about it and that she even snuck up on him and scared him." Jonathan finished before glancing up as the waiter came over to ask if they wanted any dessert.

"Hell yes," Steve answered for them all, ordering milkshakes. Nancy's strawberry and white chocolate with sprinkles, Steve's a chocolate and peanut butter and Jonathan's a plain vanilla.

"You're such a boring dude," Steve told him, stirring his own milkshake.

"That's me," Jonathan said with a shrug, watching as Nancy reached out to pinch Steve's side.

"Ouch, fuck! I was kidding," Steve whined, rubbing away the sting. He glanced at Jonathan and pointed, "See! Byers knows I was just messing with him. He's smiling."

Jonathan shook his head, smile still visible, before moving to grab his glass but he stopped short, turning his head quickly when someone sat beside him. He stared at the woman, too stunned to speak.

"Can we help you?" Nancy asked, and Steve could tell just by her tone of voice that she clearly did not like the way Jonathan had gone pale as he stared at this woman.

She was older, at least in her twenties, with long brown hair and bright blue eyes. Her lips were painted a fiery red and she glanced at Steve and Nancy with uninterested eyes before turning back to Jonathan, those painted lips smirking.

"Hey, there, Jonathan," she cooed, her eyes trailing down Jonathan's face.

“Lori,” Jonathan breathed and Steve and Nancy shared a confused look. Jonathan knew this woman?

“How have you been?” *Lori* asked as she reached out to grab Jonathan’s milkshake. He quickly let go of the glass as she grabbed it and he swallowed thickly as she wrapped her lips around the straw.

“I-I’m fine,” Jonathan said quietly, looking away from the woman. He began to drift, staring into nothing and putting up his walls.

“Yeah? Good to hear. So, what happened with you and Eric?” she questioned, putting the glass back on the table, “one minute he was obsessed with you and now he curses your name any chance he gets.” She smiled, her teeth glinting in the light as Jonathan’s shoulders tensed, “did you sleep around on him?” she looked back to Steve, and then to Nancy, “wouldn’t put it past you, given the history he tells me you’ve got.”

Nancy glared at the woman and Steve felt his jaw tense as he watched the way Jonathan’s face went blank. “I’m sorry,” he began, sitting up straight and narrowing his eyes at the woman, “but who the fuck are you?”

Before Lori could respond, Jonathan spoke up.

“You can tell Eric to keep my fucking name out of his mouth,” Jonathan whispered fiercely, turning so that he met Lori’s feral grin, “I’m done with him and he’s made it perfectly fucking clear the he wants nothing to do with me.”

Steve had never seen Byers so angry. The fury was practically rolling off of him in waves and he was staring at Lori with the coldest glare he could ever give. Whoever Eric was, it was obvious that he was a sore spot of Byers.

Lori chuckled, standing slowly, “I’ll pass on the word,” she drawled, sliding her fingers over to Jonathan. To Steve’s surprise, and maybe even jealousy, Jonathan allowed her fingers to graze his jaw.

The look on his face was absolutely blank, but there was something in Jonathan’s eyes. Something alive and clawing at him.

“Still so beautiful,” Lori said, voice thoughtful, “so tragic to think about how disgusting you truly are.” She slid her fingers off of his face, smiling wickedly as she walked away. Steve and Nancy watched her leave, eyes wide.

“What the hell was that, Byers?” Steve demanded once he turned to face Jonathan.

He paused.

Jonathan was staring a hole into the table, biting his bottom lip so hard that it was clearly going to give and bleed any second. His hands were fisted on top of the table, entire body shaking.

“Jonathan?” Nancy reached out to him, worried.

The sight of her hand coming closer to touch his caused Jonathan immediate panic and he jumped, his knee hitting the bottom of the table. Nancy gasped as the movement knocked over Steve’s shake, the chocolate and peanut butter landing on the tall boy’s dark jeans and plain white tee.

“Shit, Byers!” Steve ground out, standing and shaking his pant-leg, “Seriously, what the fuck? You let that crazy bitch touch your fucking face but you freak out if Nancy tries to touch your hand? What kind of bullshit-”

“Steve,” Nancy said pointedly.

Steve bit his tongue, looking over to Jonathan.

His face had lost all the fury it had before and now he just looked stressed and sad. He stood from his own seat, dragging a hand down his face.

“I’m sorry about your clothes, Harrington,” he murmured, eyes closed as he pressed a hand to his temple, “and Nancy...I just...” he trailed off, turning away. “I’ll walk back to the theater and get my car.”

“It’s so far away, Jonathan, and it’s the middle of the night,” Nancy protested.

"Don't care," Jonathan muttered.

"Don't be stupid, Byers, it's just clothes. Let me drive you back." Steve said quickly, pressing napkins against his pants. The paper quickly dampened against the sticky fluid.

"I don't want you to." And there it was. They were right back to square one, with Jonathan closed off and spooked. Fuck, they'd been having such a good time. Jonathan had laughed and he'd joked...he'd been *happy* for fucks sake.

And now he was just walking away, not even saying goodbye?

Okay, now Steve was pissed.

"I don't fucking *care* if you don't want to, I'm not letting you walk alone at night!" Steve shouted, ignoring the way Nancy and several other people in the restaurant jumped at his volume.

Hell, even Jonathan was shaking a bit and Steve inhaled deeply.

"You didn't let me walk alone at night, remember?" Steve said, voice quieter, "I won't let you either. You don't have to talk to us, or even look at us...but please, let me take you to your car."

He watched Jonathan's shoulder drop and he sighed in relief when Jonathan nodded glumly. "Great." He set some money onto the table and helped Nancy up, ushering her ahead as he and Jonathan walked out side-by-side.

He kept trying to meet Jonathan's eyes but the smaller male wouldn't even look his way.

The ride was awkward and quiet. Nancy kept trying to engage Jonathan in a conversation but Byers just wouldn't talk.

When they finally parked beside Jonathan's car, he jumped out of the BMW, not looking back until Steve shouted for him.

"What, Harrington?" Jonathan asked tiredly, turning around. Fuck, he looked so sad, so tired all of a sudden. Well, no. Byers always

looked tired but now he looked *drained*.

“Drive safe, man,” Steve said simply, offering a small smile, “See you around?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said quietly, “maybe.”

There was no nod or small smile of confirmation this time and it made Steve feel extremely upset. He watched the Ford drive away from the theater and looked over at Nancy, who looked just as upset.

“We need to find out what’s wrong with him,” Steve said, frowning, “Starting off with why he doesn’t let us touch him.”

“He doesn’t let anyone touch him,” Nancy murmured, staring down at her knees.

“There are exceptions,” Steve said and he began to give examples as Nancy gave him a confused glance, “The brats are always touching him, right? His mom has got to be another one.” He frowned, “that girl back at the restaurant. You used to be able to touch him, yeah? I hugged him last night, when he let me stay over.”

“You did?” Nancy gasped, eyes wide.

“He froze,” Steve offered, “he didn’t shove me or anything but,” he sighed, pained, “It happened again when I tried to hand him some money to pay for his gas. He wouldn’t take it from my hand, Nancy. I never actually touched his skin. That’s it, you see? He doesn’t let his skin touch anyone else’s unless it’s one of the kids or his mom.”

Nancy stared at Steve, humming softly.

“What?”

She grinned, a twinkle in her eye, “I thought you said you didn’t notice him very much earlier. Sounds to me like you notice him a lot.”

Steve licked his lips, turning away quickly as she giggled. “Hush, Wheeler. Let’s get you home.” He pulled out of the theater parking lot, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

When had he started to notice Jonathan Byers so much?

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4. And You Finally Looked into My Eyes

-Halloween-

Jonathan grinned, watching Will rush to greet his friends. God, they were adorable. The freaking Ghostbusters and they actually looked great. Dustin wasn't here yet, but Lucas, Mike and Will looked fantastic in their gimmick.

Eleven was under her sheet, flittering around as Mike chased her with his proton blaster. He watched as Max, dressed in a serial killer mask and waving around a plastic knife, crept up behind them to scare them.

It worked.

Jonathan didn't even bother to hide his laugh as their loud squeals reached his ears. He rubbed his left eye, smiling innocently as his brother shot him a betrayed glare. "What? Did you not hear yourself?"

Will's lips quirked, "I guess it was pretty funny." He turned to his friends as they began to talk about which streets to go to. The older Byers listened, snapping the occasional photo of the kids or something he just happened to find interesting.

"Where's Dustin?" Jonathan asked, glancing around. He had noticed the curly haired boy was nowhere around earlier but he figured he'd join them at any second but it a good fifteen minutes had already passed.

"His mom was busy so he got a ride from-"

The honk of a horn right behind him caused Jonathan to jerk in surprise and he fumbled with his camera. Catching it and pressing it tight to his chest, he turned, narrowing his eyes as soon as he spotted the BMW and familiar face peering at him from behind the windshield.

"Hey, Byers!" Steve called out as he exited his car. He was wearing a

very soft looking sweater, a nice shade of red that complimented his dark hair, and black jeans. He had sunglasses on, even though it was getting dark, and Jonathan could bet they probably cost more than he could ever dream of affording.

The passenger door of the BMW opened, revealing Dustin, and Steve smiled gently as the younger boy expressed his gratitude, "It's no problem, brat. You talk way too much but don't worry about it. Go hit up Loch Nora, they have the best candy."

"You heard the man!" Dustin told the rest of the pack and they all nodded excitedly, beginning to walk away but Will paused, looking back to his brother.

Jonathan turned his attention away from Steve and shoved one hand into the pocket of his Levi's, pointing the camera at Will, "Be at Mike's by nine," he told his brother, "Mom will pick you up around ten." He watched Will nod, "and be careful."

"I will be," the youngest Byers answered, smiling, "Thanks for the ride, Jonathan." He waved at his brother and quickly followed behind his friends after Mike called out to him.

Jonathan turned and damn near stumbled backwards to get away from Steve's face, mere inches away from his own, "Shit, Harrington," he frowned, looking away from the wide grin, "you need to wear a bell."

"Sorry," Steve didn't look at all apologetic, "what are you doing tonight? Let's hang out! Nancy and I were supposed to binge on horror movies and junk food but she bailed on me to hang out with Barb."

Jonathan frowned, "I don't think-

"Come on, Byers," Steve murmured, staring at him with a frown, "It's been nearly a week." And Jonathan cringed.

He'd been avoiding the hell out of Steve, it was true. If he heard his voice in the hallways at school, he'd turn the other way and quickly walk off. He'd pretend to not hear the older boy call out to him. He

even went so far as to skip an assembly during their fourth quarter so as not to run into him on Thursday.

“Hang out with me?” Steve requested gently, “Keep me company, its Halloween and I don’t want to be alone.”

Jonathan sighed, looking down at his camera. He cleaned flicked his thumb over the lens and then looked up into Steve’s confused but gentle gaze and he lowered the camera slowly. “Okay, Harrington,” he murmured, keeping his eyes on the camera, “but I don’t feel like being out so it’s either come back to my place and listen to music or nothing at all.”

“I’m totally cool with that,” Steve nodded, turning on his heel to get back to his car, “I’ll go get my tunes.”

Jonathan twitched, “Hey, no. I meant listen to *my* music. I’m not listening to Bob Seger or R.E.M.”

Steve paused suddenly, glancing behind him, “You seriously think I listen to R.E.M?”

Jonathan felt his lips twitch, “You struck me as the type.” He snickered at the complete look of betrayal on Harrington’s face.

“See, this is why we need to hang out more,” Steve said, clearly offended as he continued on his path to his car. “I’ll bring some of my stuff and I bet we’ll have a similar taste, you’ll see.”

Jonathan chuckled, making his way to his own car as he called back, “Somehow I doubt it.”

“You’ll see, Byers!” and Jonathan shook his head, stepping into his Ford and driving home. As soon as he got there, he greeted his mother but paused, staring at her costume with a brow raised.

“You’re even dressing like him now?” he teased, whistling as she turned around in a circle with a wide grin. The sheriff’s costume was actually adorable and his mom looked ridiculously happy. “You look great, mom. Hopper will be thrilled.”

“It’s not just for him,” Joyce said, spinning a plastic gun around her

pinky finger, "I wanted to be a cop back in high school."

"Really?" Jonathan blinked, leaning against the wall and staring curiously at his mom, "Why didn't you go for it?"

"Lonnie didn't like the idea of it," she rolled her eyes, completely missing the way her eldest cringed at the name of her late husband and his father, "said a woman was for breeding and that I should stick to that."

Jonathan swallowed hard, nodding his head slowly as he gave his mom a tight-lipped smile. "What a dick."

Joyce glanced at him, surprised, but then she snorted with laughter, "Yes, he was." She smiled at him, "No plans for tonight?"

"Oh, Steve Harrington is coming by," Jonathan said, glad to have the subject change, "we're going to listen to some music and...hang out."

"Hang out?" Joyce repeated, head tilting.

"Hang out." Jonathan confirmed, staring down at his worn chucks. "I'm going to grab a shower." Before he could move, he felt his mom's arms wrap around his waist and he smiled, hugging her back tightly.

"I'm glad you won't be alone, Jonathan," she told him and they shared another smile before Joyce turned her head at the sound of Hoppe's car horn blaring. "Well, that's obviously Jim. I'll be home with Will later, okay?"

"Sure, mom," he led her out, accepting the kiss on his cheek, and waving as she made her way to the car, "Have fun!" he closed the door slowly, pressing his forehead against it. Shit. Now he was thinking of his father.

The memory of being cold began to creep up on his skin and Jonathan shivered violently, ripping himself away from the door and heading to the bathroom. He pulled off his shirt on the way, dropping it into the sink before turning on the water for a shower-as hot as it could go.

He scrubbed hard. It stung, and he could see through the steam how pink his skin was becoming with the combination of his raw rubbing and the temperature of the water. It wasn't helping. He was still so dirty...

The vacant black eyes were staring upwards but seeing nothing. There was a large red splotch on its white fur, and the corner of its mouth.

Jonathan sobbed, his hands covering his mouth as he stared at the dead rabbit. A hand was pressed against his shoulder, and it squeezed and Jonathan winced, hiccupping as he looked up into the man's irritated expression.

"Stop it. Be a man."

"It's dead," Jonathan whimpered.

"Stop being such a faggot, I didn't raise you to be this way."

"Son of a bitch," Jonathan muttered, finally shutting off the water. He was remembering too much lately and he hated it. He'd been fine for a few months but now...

Loud knocks on the front door startled him and he gasped as he almost slipped while stepping out of the bathtub.

"Byers! I've got my music, let me in so I can school you in taste!" several more harsh knocks sounding, creating a very annoying beat.

"Shit, Harrington..." he darted into his room, pulling a pair of grey colored lounge pants up his legs and wincing as they caught on his wet skin, before grabbing a long-sleeved white shirt and tugging it on as well.

He ignored the fact that his hair was probably plastered in an odd manner on his head and went over to the door, jerking it open as Steve continued his incessant knocking. "Enough already," he grunted, leaning aside to let Steve in only Steve continued to stand outside, staring at him. "What?"

"Your hair is wet." Steve said unnecessarily.

A drop of water dripped off of his forehead and Jonathan could see Steve's eyes following it. He flicked it away with his thumb the closer it got

to his eyes.

"Mm," Jonathan agreed, "Took a shower."

"Your skin is pink," Steve blinked.

"It was a hot shower." Jonathan murmured. And with that, he gestured for Steve to come in and then shut the door behind him silently.

--

Johnathan had his eyes closed, a gorgeous and serene smile on his face as he listened to the crooning voice of Freddie Mercury. "Color me impressed," he drawled, eyes opening slowly and Steve grinned, enjoying the slightly hazy gaze in the younger man's eyes.

They were sitting a few feet away from each other, their backs and heads resting against the edge of Johnathan's bed. The bulky music player sounded off behind them and Steve stretched his legs out, smiling over at Jonathan.

"Didn't expect me to be much of a Queen fan?" Steve murmured, watching Johnathan bring a knee up to his chest and rest his chin on it.

"Everyone is a Queen fan," he said seriously and Steve laughed. "I'm still not going to listen to Seger, though."

"I know one song of his," Steve countered, eyes rolling, "That's all." He tapped his fingers on the floor to the beat, "Pink Floyd after this?"

"Sounds good," Jonathan nodded, "The Clash and Joy Division after."

"Not much of a fan," Steve said, smirking as it got the desired effect. Johnathan clicked his tongue, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

"Get out." Byers muttered, pointing to his door and Steve laughed, enjoying the time they were having.

Good. This was good.

They hummed the lyrics to Pink Floyd's Another Brick in the Wall, and once the song was done, Steve leaned over to grab the next tape.

“Do you consider me a friend, Harrington?”

Pardon?

Steve’s fingers twitched and he released the tape, staring curiously at Jonathan, “Are you being serious right now?” and Jonathan was being serious. He had this look on his face, like he was terrified of the answer. But why? Did he truly not believe them to be friends?

“Of course I consider you a friend, man,” Steve said gently, “I’d like for us to be better friends, sure, but I’m patient. I know that you’re kind of... um...”

“Creepy?” Jonathan whispered, smiling grimly as he glanced at Steve, “I know.”

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Steve said, a frown on his lips, “I regret calling you that, you know?” he shook his head, “and I still haven’t apologized for it, have I?”

“S’ok,” Jonathan shrugged, “I was being creepy, staring at you like that and all.” He sighed, “You were good-looking to me,” he admitted, pointedly looking away from Steve’s wide eyes.

Steve shook his head, a wry grin tugging his lips, *“Were? I no longer am good-looking to you?”* he stuck out his bottom lip as Jonathan glanced at him and then exhaled slowly at the slow, gorgeous smile that Jonathan blessed him with in return.

“Not one bit,” Jonathan said, erupting into a laugh at Steve’s slack-jawed expression.

Steve huffed, crossing his arms. “Yeah, right, Byers. You so find me attractive.” He paused for a beat. “The feeling is mutual, by the way.”

Jonathan’s laughter abruptly stopped and Steve smirked, seeing the blush spread across Jonathan’s cheeks again.

The music rolled on and in between switching tapes, they would talk about little things. Jonathan asked about Dustin, and Steve told about how he bumped into the curly-haired boy and his mom at the supermarket.

"She had a lot of paperwork to get done and waiting for her to finish it would have made Dustin late so I offered to drop him off," Steve said, shrugging a shoulder. "Just helping the kid out. He doesn't have siblings, you know? He mentioned it in the car. I think I'm going to hang around with him, be there for him like you are with Will."

Jonathan smiled, "Dustin will like that. He thinks you're really cool."

"He's a smart kid," Steve nodded, ignoring Jonathan's snort. He stood up, stretching, "Join me outside for a smoke?"

"I don't smoke," Jonathan said but he got up anyway. His hair, damp but no longer wet, fluttered into his eyes and he brushed it away in annoyance. Steve found it adorable.

They ended up strolling through the forest, and Jonathan pointed out Castle Byers, telling Steve about the day he and Will built it.

"It was raining and we got so sick," Jonathan smiled. "It lasted a week."

Steve smiled at the little hideaway, blowing smoke into the air. He glanced up at it, watched it disappear into the night sky and he frowned, his mind drifting to blonde curls and blue eyes.

"Is it weird that I sort of miss Billy?" Steve asked quietly. He saw the way Jonathan's head snapped in his direction and he quickly added, "I don't want to be with him. I mean, I'll never go back to him. Shit, forget it. Pretend I didn't say anything."

Jonathan was quiet for a good while. It made Steve insanely nervous. He was probably thinking about how much Steve deserved to get his ass kicked by Billy for being so fucking stupid-

"It's not weird," Jonathan finally said, voice soft.

He licked his lips and then continued, "You just miss the feeling of not being lonely. You miss kissing him, holding him," he shifted uncomfortably, "having him fuck you-"

"I fucked him," Steve interrupted, voice subdued. He smiled at Jonathan's eye-roll. "Just wanted to point that out," he finished sheepishly, looking back to the sky.

"Whatever," Jonathan murmured, blushing and waving his hand around. "You miss the feeling of being touched and wanted. It's not weird." He smiled, a bit sadly. "Not at all."

Steve sighed, "He was my first, you know? First guy. Him being popular meant I wouldn't get my ass kicked at school and knowing I had him, that I could fuck him in my room and then face my parents, who would fucking disown me if they knew about me being gay, that I could have him in secret...it was fun."

Jonathan listened, nodding quietly for Steve to continue.

"He liked to constantly remind me that I was nothing," Steve murmured, "that as soon as he and I ended, everyone would turn on me because they would obviously favor their king." He shook his head, "it used to scare me but I don't think I care anymore. Even if I am nothing, at least I'm not his."

The sound of the younger man scoffing had Steve looking over at Jonathan, who was staring directly at him, fringe covering his eyes slightly. Quiet for a few seconds, Jonathan reached up to swipe the bangs away from his face and he stared pointedly into Steve's face.

Jonathan Byers was dangerously close to making eye contact, Steve realized, awed. He watched as Jonathan's teeth bit at his bottom lip and he suddenly found himself worrying for that lip. Such nice lips...

"I know it's probably hard to want to love someone so much only for it to fail and fail horribly." Jonathan murmured, and there was something in that sentence. An underlying story...

"But, Steve," he murmured and the fact that Byers had called him by his first name stunned Steve so much that he couldn't look away as Jonathan finally lifted his head, their eyes meeting for the first time since all those years ago. "You were abused. Nothing that Hargrove said is true. You are everything and he is nothing."

Steve stared into Jonathan's brown eyes. Fuck, they were lovely in the moonlight. So warm and so deep. "Jonathan," he reached out to that pale cheek but sighed as the younger man flinched. "Right. I'm sorry." He pulled his hand back, staring down at it, a bit more than hurt.

Fuck, this was hard. How was this going to progress? How was he ever going to get Jonathan to open up-

"That woman from the restaurant," Jonathan began after a few moments of aching silence, voice light, "she was a friend of this guy that I was... close to."

"Eric," Steve remembered.

"Yeah," Jonathan breathed, rubbing his eye with his thumb. "Um...it didn't end well."

"What happened?" Steve asked. He could see the way Jonathan was becoming anxious, "You don't have to tell me, Byers."

Jonathan nodded slowly, "I told him something." He said simply. "I told him something about myself that he really didn't like." He exhaled into the air, tilting his head up to look at the stars, "That's all, really."

"There's more to it," Steve said knowingly, taking another drag of his cigarette, "But I won't press." It meant enough that Jonathan trusted him to tell him the little he did.

"Thank you," Jonathan whispered. "I would tell you and maybe someday I will but right now, I like having you as a friend." He smiled, eyes glistening, "I don't want that to end so I'll hold off."

"Hate to tell you, Byers," Steve grinned around his cigarette, "But whatever you think is so terrible about yourself won't matter. I'm a pretty clingy dude. You're stuck with me."

Jonathan chuckled, "Lucky me."

They walked around the forest for a while longer before heading back to the house. After listening to another hour of music, with Jonathan damn near falling asleep, Steve decided it was best to go home.

"So, listen," Steve said, leaning against the door. Jonathan nodded and waited for him to continue, his arms crossed and his eyebrow raised.

"No more avoiding me," Steve said seriously, "It really bothered me when you did it and now that you know we're friends...let's hang out more."

Jonathan considered him silently for a few seconds and Steve exhaled loudly in relief when the blonde nodded. "Shit, you didn't have to make me sweat it out."

"It was funny," Jonathan grinned and Steve snorted, saying goodbye to the younger man. Once in his car, he honked his horn lightly, holding his hand out of the window to wave.

Jonathan waved back, that tender smile still on his face, dimples lit and eyes actually making contact with his own. And with that final image, Steve headed for him, feeling happier than he had all week.

--

Jonathan jerked awake, his body almost slipping off of the couch. He looked up blearily, watching Will rush into the house with a pillowcase loaded with candy. His mother and Hopper followed after and Eleven popped in last, pulling the door closed once she was inside.

"Jonathan!" Will exclaimed, hurrying over to his brother, "I got like six pounds of candy!" he dumped the bag over Jonathan's legs, "Steve was right about Loch Nora, too!"

Jonathan smiled sleepily at his brother, patting his head. He greeted Eleven, who flipped the sheet over her head and beamed at him, and then lifted a hand to Hopper. "Hey, how did it go?"

"Your mother stepped on my foot," Hopper replied, wincing as Joyce smacked his shoulder. "And now she's hitting me so I'm afraid I'm going to have to lock her up for assaulting an officer."

"She's the officer tonight," Eleven pointed out, handing Jonathan a candy bar, "She could lock you up instead."

"Wouldn't that be something," Hopper leered as Joyce smiled flirtatiously and Jonathan twitched, embarrassed.

"And on that note," he said, shoving Will's candy off of his legs and onto the couch before standing, "I think I'll head to bed. I have work tomorrow." He said his goodnights and wandered over to his room.

He plopped down onto his bed, exhausted. Tomorrow's shift was his last

early one. Jenny had set him up so that he only worked late noon and closing but the idea of having to avoid Eric one more day was putting his mind on edge.

If he hadn't told him...if Jonathan had kept his damn mouth shut and didn't freak out during their intimate moment...would it have been different? Would they still be as happy as they were before it all came crashing down?

Hands grabbed onto his hips from behind and Jonathan jumped, turning away from his locker quickly. He stared up into grey eyes and smiled, glancing towards the door. "Someone could walk in," he said quietly.

"Then I'll make this fast," Eric murmured, ducking his head to press his lips tightly against Jonathan's. He pulled him in close, his tongue pushing past Jonathan's lips and groaning lowly into the kiss before pulling back. "There's a few friends I want you to meet, is that okay?"

Jonathan hesitated. "Right now?"

Eric nodded, gesturing with his thumb to the door, "Yeah, they're outside. I've been telling everyone I met someone," he admitted, "and they want to try and call me on a bluff."

Jonathan bit his lips nervously but nodded anyway. "Okay, sure." He tugged off his burgundy vest, done with his shift for the night and followed Eric towards the back of the theater.

They exited the building, turning down the alley and finding three men and two women leaning against a Jeep Cherokee. Eric greeted them all, keeping his hand on Jonathan's shoulder as the smaller man waved shyly at the group.

One of the women, a brunette with sharp blue eyes stared him up and down and Jonathan smiled timidly as she smirked and took a deep pull of the lit cigarette in her hand.

"Who's the kid?" she asked, cigarette smoke filtering out of her red painted lips. She smiled wickedly, "He's fucking pretty."

Jonathan flushed, stammering out a greeting and glancing at Eric as the older man chuckled and swung an arm around his shoulders.

"Back off, Lori, he's mine."

The words were surely meant to be playful but Jonathan felt his heart flutter anyway. He hid his smile, staring down at Lori's bright red heels. Idly, he wondered how the hell women could walk on those things. It was honestly impressive.

"Yours?" Lori echoed, looking delighted, "you mean your boyfriend?"

Jonathan's eyes widened as Eric confirmed and he looked up at the older man in stunned silence.

"I mean, you are, aren't you?" Eric murmured, smile devious and Jonathan felt his heartbeat speed up and he nodded, smiling brightly as Lori and the others all cheered their friend.

Jonathan grabbed his pillow, pressing it hard into his face. The feeling of wanting to scream was eating him alive but he didn't want to bring any attention to himself. What the hell was wrong with him lately?

Why were all of the memories hitting him at every turn?

Nothing had changed in his life. Everything he was doing, he'd been doing for months and there was no difference significant enough to-

Jonathan slowly pulled the pillow away from his face, realization blossoming into his mind. He thought about brown eyes, an adorably dopey smile, and really nice jaw.

Harrington. Steve was the only difference in his life.

"But why?" he whispered to himself, dragging a hand down his face. Steve was great. He was so easy, so patient. Just like Eric had been...

"It's fine," Eric murmured, pulling his lips away from Jonathan's hickey covered neck, "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for yet."

Jonathan sighed, his fingers stroking Eric's hair, "It's not that I don't want to..."

"I know," Eric winked, "I can feel that you want to." He ran his thumb

over the hot blush on Jonathan's cheekbone, "Don't worry about it. Soon."

And then it all changed. So fast.

Jonathan cringed, turning and running the memory. He had already had an unpleasant memory of one of most horrible days of his life.

He would not put up with a second one.

This couldn't happen again. His heart broke and shattered with Eric...and Jonathan would be damned if he let it happen again with Steve.

Maybe he was being selfish, but Jonathan didn't care. He didn't want to lose Steve.

He wouldn't.

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Notes for the Chapter:

I have nothing against R.E.M, friends. It is just a joke. The next chapter is going to be pretty heavy. This is where we pay attention to the tags and speaking of, I completely forgot to write a tag about Lonnie being dead because I'm an idiot but yeah.

He's gone. Otherwise Steve would murder him with that bat and go to jail and never end up with his Byers boy.

Can't let that happen.

5. Our Friendship Was New but Easy

Steve woke up to the sun in his face.

He winced, opening one eye slowly. God, he hated the curtains that his mother picked out for his room. They were such a flimsy material, a plaid pattern that would just let all the sunlight seep into the area.

He could hear sounds coming from downstairs and he shoved his face back into his pillow, hoping to just be able to fall right back to sleep.

“Steve! Are you awake, sweetie?”

Steve muffled his groan with the pillow before sitting up, dragging his hands down his face, “Yeah!” he replied, standing slowly. He pulled a pair of green sweatpants up his legs and ran a hand through his hair, walking into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Stepping into the kitchen a few minutes later, he greeted his father quietly and sat beside him, watching the older man read the paper. “Any plans today? Maybe we could-”

“Your mother and I are going to visit your aunt,” his father interrupted, flipping the page to read the sports section, “Your cousin just is going to be induced this afternoon, the baby is ready.”

Steve frowned, choosing not to mention that he had no idea which aunt or which cousin his father was even speaking of. “Oh, okay.” He tapped his hands on the table, glancing over as his mom poured herself some coffee.

“You should come with us, sweetheart,” she told him, turning to face him, holding the cream colored mug with both hands; “It’s been a while since they’ve seen you.”

“Oh, no,” Steve said quickly, “I promised Nancy I would take her and Barbara to the mall later. They want to get a new coat and some bag to match and then tomorrow I’ve got to help another friend with something,” he lied, looking away as she set her mug down.

“Well, alright,” his mother said, flittering upstairs, “I’ll just grab my

bags and we can go, dear.”

Steve slouched and looked back to his father, who had set the paper down and was staring at him with curious eyes. “What?”

“A young man called earlier,” his father said, folding his hands on top of the paper, “He seemed very interested in your whereabouts and told me to tell you that he was looking for you.”

Steve straightened, hopeful, “Jonathan Byers?”

His father frowned, “No, not him.” He seemed confused, “You are friends with Lonnie’s son?”

Shit.

“It’s sort of a new friendship,” Steve murmured, standing up to open the pantry. He pulled out a bag of bagels, setting them on the counter and opening the bag to pick one out. “Anyway, who was it?”

He grabbed a knife, cutting into the bagel neatly, and then popping it into the toaster oven. He headed to the fridge next, grabbing the cream cheese and a carton of strawberries.

“He said his name was Billy.”

Shit *fuck*.

Steve turned slowly, seeing his father staring at him questioningly. “Right,” he muttered, “um, you’ve never met him. He was my partner in science last year.”

The toaster oven beeped and Steve ignored it, watching his father as the older man regarded him carefully. He kept their eyes locked and he smiled lopsidedly at the man, shrugging a shoulder, “Okay. To be honest, I think he’s having some sort of crazy party. He probably just wanted to invite me but I’m not into it. He’s pretty into drinking games and all other kind of stuff.”

His father nodded, seemingly content with the answer, and turned back to his paper, “It’s smart of you to avoid him then. You should stay home, watch the house.”

"Right," Steve agreed, turning back to his bagel at the sound of the toaster oven beeping again. He pulled out his bagel, hissing and blowing on his fingers as he touched the hot bread. He prepared his breakfast slowly, grabbing onto a glass and filling it with orange juice before setting it at the table.

He had just taken his first sip of juice when his mother came back downstairs, a bag slung over her shoulder and struggling with a carry-on suitcase. Steve stood, grabbing onto the carry-on and walking it down for her, setting it on the ground and pulling up the handle so that she could pull it along.

"Thanks, honey," she sighed. She grabbed his chin, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek, "Clean the house and wash your clothes," she told him, "and be careful. Make sure to lock up anytime you leave."

Steve nodded, watching her grab the handle of the rolling suitcase and head out the door. He turned to his father, shaking his hand firmly. "Safe travels," he told the older man, watching him grab his own suitcase where it was perched near the door.

"I expect everything to be as we left it," his father said, expression stern, "No parties, Steven."

Steve nodded, and he rolled his eyes as the man left. He plopped back down onto his seat, frowning as he rubbed at his bare shoulder.

Since when did that asshole call his damn house? Was Hargrove seriously looking for him?

Steve took a sip of his orange juice, staring down at his plate. The bagel, the edges slightly burnt due to his neglect, was sitting open-faced on the fine china. It had a smear of cream cheese on one side and the other was loaded with sliced strawberries.

Sighing, he moved to grab the bagel and then paused, listening to the loud ringing of the phone. He turned in his chair, staring at the telephone with his lips pulled back in a sneer. Fucking Billy. He stood, moving to the ringing contraption and pulling it hard from the wall, raising it to his ear.

“What the fuck is your problem? Why would you even call here, you dick? Are you crazy?”

“...Steve?” the soft voice on the other end stunned him and Steve hissed lowly in pain as he bit his bottom lip accidentally.

Fuckingfuck.

“Jonathan,” Steve breathed, a smile slipping onto his face immediately. He leaned his arm against the wall, “God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t...if I’d known it was you I would have never answered that way.”

“It’s fine,” he sounded bashful now, *“Um, I asked Nancy for your number. I hope that you’re okay with that.”*

“Of course, Byers,” Steve chuckled, “I was actually going to bother her for yours as soon as I saw her.” Curious as to why Jonathan was calling so early, he went ahead and asked, “So, what’s up?”

“I need a favor. My car is deciding to be completely unreasonable this morning and I need a ride to work. I would just take my mom’s car but she’s going to be driving Will and Eleven around all day so that idea is out. Do...would you mind? I could always just walk if you’re busy or maybe take a bus-”

Christ, Jonathan was adorable when he babbled. Steve hated to put an end to it but he did anyway. “It’s no trouble, Byers,” he said, “give me about fifteen minutes to get ready?” he glanced over at the table, where he had left his bagel. “And while you’re waiting, make me breakfast.”

“Oh,” Jonathan sounded both amused and confused. Adorable really. *“Well, okay. See you soon, Harrington.”*

“Soon, Byers,” Steve murmured, smiling as he hung up. He fist-pumped the air, flying up the steps to his room.

He hadn’t planned on seeing Byers today but he was more than happy with the sudden events.

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“You’re hungry again?”

Jonathan smiled at his mother’s question, placing the sunny-side up eggs onto the plate. “It’s for Steve. He’s coming over to give me a ride to work and wanted breakfast.”

Hopper blinked owlishly, glancing at Joyce over the rim of his mug, as Jonathan set the plate down onto the table. It was loaded with pancakes and bacon and now, eggs. “Wow, you weren’t kidding. He is happier when he thinks about that guy.”

Jonathan blushed, staring at his mother accusingly, who merely smiled charmingly up at him. He huffed, sitting down and stealing her mug of coffee, bringing it to his lips. “Don’t you two have a date to be on?” he muttered, cheeks still pink as he avoided their laughing eyes.

Hopper smirked, standing slowly, “Actually, I’ve got to get to the station but tonight,” he winked at Joyce, “I’ll see you tonight.” He leaned over, kissing her puckered lips. “Have a good day at work, son,” he said, patting Jonathan’s shoulder.

Jonathan hid his smile behind the rim of the mug. He didn’t think he’d ever like hearing the term from Hopper but he actually truly enjoyed it. He glanced up as the front door opened and Will and Eleven came inside, dragging a familiar face behind them.

Steve greeting Hopper and Joyce merrily before focusing his attention on Jonathan, “Morning, Byers,” he beamed, snatching Hopper’s empty seat. He looked down at the plate of food, rolling the sleeves of his black jacket up his forearms, “Can I hire you to cook for me?” he picked up his fork, stabbing the egg yolk.

“What’s the pay?” Jonathan smirked, “I know you’re loaded so it better be good.”

“I’ll tip generously,” Steve nodded, cutting into a pancake. They shared a slow smile, Jonathan ducking his eyes away as he heard his mother giggle.

Hopper snorted from behind them, “You two, seriously.” He pulled

Will and Eleven into a hug, “El, behave for Joyce today.”

“I will,” Eleven nodded, smiling up at her dad as he left the house. She turned to Joyce, “Can we go play in Castle Byers until it’s time to go?”

Joyce nodded, standing up, “Just try not to get dirty.” They watched the kids rush out of the house and Joyce turned back to Jonathan, “I’m going to go get ready, honey. Have a good day at work,” she leaned down to kiss his forehead and then smiled at Steve, “Thank you for driving him, Steve. Would you mind picking him up after his shift?”

“Mom,” Jonathan murmured, “I’m sure Steve has got things to-”

“No worries,” Steve said after he’d swallowed down his second pancake, “I’ll probably not bring him home right away though, if that’s okay.”

“Absolutely!” Joyce said before Jonathan could even reply. She smiled widely as she turned away, “Keep him out as late as you’d like!” her steps echoed around the small area as she went into her room, closing the door behind her.

Jonathan watched her go, his face almost entirely red. He turned back to Steve slowly, who winked at him. “Not a word, Harrington.”

Steve mimed locking his lips and throwing away the key.

It didn’t take him very long to eat his breakfast and then they were off, arguing about what to listen to on the drive to the theater.

“Anything but the *Talking Heads*, Jonathan, please,” Steve had begged and Jonathan merely laughed, popping in one of his tapes containing songs of said band. He grinned at the way Steve’s fingers twitched on the wheel at the sound of the first song.

“I’ll teach you to like them,” Jonathan promised and Steve snorted, making a left at the light. “So, what are your plans for today?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said honestly, “My parents are gone again so maybe I’ll just head back home and watch something on the

television or listen to some *good* music,” he shot a look at Jonathan, who merely chuckled, “other than that, I’ve got nothing.”

“Your parents are gone a lot,” Jonathan played with his name tag, placing the magnet onto the vest. “Why don’t you ever go with them?” he finished fiddling with the magnet and then pulled the vest on over his button-up.

“They ignore me at home enough,” Steve murmured, “what’s the point of going anywhere with them if they’ll just ignore me there, too?” he glanced at Jonathan, smiling, “besides, who else is going to chauffeur you around, Byers?”

Jonathan smiled back but he couldn’t help but wonder about what Steve had just said. Steve’s parents ignored him? They were gone so much but Jonathan always assumed that the reason why Steve would stay back was because of school and maybe even Billy back when they were together but...

“Come over,” Jonathan said simply.

“What?” Steve had his eyes on the road, but he tilted his head in Jonathan’s direction.

“Whenever they go off,” Jonathan elaborated, voice small, “you should come over to my house. Mom obviously wouldn’t mind and Will likes you.” He swallowed hard, “*I* like having you around...so just come over when you’re bored or lonely.”

“Do you mean it?”

The way Steve said it, so hopeful and also so unsure, made Jonathan smile as he nodded. “I really do.”

“Will you cook for me?”

Jonathan chuckled, “Is my cooking the only reason you like me, Harrington?”

“Oh, there are lots of reasons,” Steve said, glancing at Jonathan and winking, “but that one is pretty high up on my list. Seriously, you should have seen my sad breakfast this morning. A bagel with fruit

and orange juice a great breakfast does not make.”

“There’s nothing wrong with bagels and fruit,” Jonathan argued, just to tease the older boy.

“Everything is wrong with them after having tasted your cooking,” Steve shot back, “honestly, Jonathan, those pancakes,” he sighed wistfully, “I could live off of those.”

Steve was adorable. Jonathan chuckled, “I’ll make them anytime you come over then.” He glanced up and reached for the visor, pulling it down and staring at his reflection in the small mirror. He frowned, using his fingers to try and control his fringe with no luck.

He fished his burgundy bowtie out of his satchel and he clipped it on, adjusting it a few times before finally deciding that it was just right. Jonathan looked away from the last piece of his uniform to gaze at his face.

His eyes, as usual, looked tired. His pale face stared back at him and his fingers slowly traced down his cheek. He was so plain looking, he despised it. He often wished he could look more like his mother or Will. Instead, he ended up looking a lot more like his father than he ever wanted to.

“Stop that.”

Jonathan jumped, turning away from his reflection to stare at Steve. He didn’t even realize that they had made it to the theater, Steve having parked at the back, where the employees parked away from the entrance. “Stop what?”

“Whatever bad thought you were thinking about yourself,” Steve replied, frowning, “You look great, Jonathan.”

Johnathan scoffed, crossing his arms, “I look exhausted,” he muttered, “As usual.”

“I’ll make you see what I see one day,” Steve said seriously and Jonathan blinked as he stepped out of the car. He followed the taller boy with his eyes as Steve walked around the car and then his eyes widened when Steve ended up beside him, opening the passenger

door for him.

Steve smiled playfully down at him, resting his forearm on the top of the roof as he peered down at Jonathan, "Well? What kind of a gentleman would I be if I didn't open your door?"

Jonathan shook his head, getting out slowly. "This isn't a date, Steve, you don't need to be a gentleman."

His face reddened immediately at Steve's reply.

"You're damn right this isn't a date. I wouldn't *let* our first date be me driving you to work."

--

It really was amusing to see just how flustered Jonathan could get. His skin was so pale; the way his cheeks and nose brightened in a matter of seconds was just so interesting!

Steve closed the door behind Jonathan, grinning cheekily at the smaller male, "So, what do you say we go back to my place after? Maybe we can order pizza, watch a few movies, go for a swim? Your mom said I could keep you for as long as I want."

"She didn't say that," Jonathan protested.

"Oh, she totally did!" Steve laughed, "Go back a few pages and you'll see it."

"What does that even-" he paused as a car parked a few spaces away and he smiled as a woman exited the Chevrolet. Steve watched as she walked up to them, her face open and friendly.

"Hello, Jonathan!"

"Hi, Jenny," Jonathan said to the older blonde woman. She was rail thin, with shining green eyes and a warm smile and Steve found himself waving, even though he didn't know her. She greeted him happily and Steve noticed that her vest was a shade lighter than Jonathan's and instead of wearing black pants, a dark colored skirt fluttered past her knees.

"You might want to grab a sweater, sweetheart," she told him as she walked past, "Arnold says that the air conditioning was left on all night and it is freezing in there." She opened the back door, zipping up her sweatshirt as she ducked inside.

There was an immediate chill that slipped through the opened door and Steve could feel his nose tingle. He looked to Jonathan when the younger man sighed loudly.

"Great," Jonathan muttered, raking a hand through his hair, "I left my damn hoodie in the backseat of my car." His fringe fell right back in front of his eyes and Steve's fingers itched to sweep it aside. He registered the blonde's words, frowning.

Byers didn't have a jacket? The quiet boy was wearing his usual white button-up underneath the burgundy vest but the sleeves on that shirt wouldn't warm him much for how cold it was in the theater.

Well, that just wouldn't do.

Steve didn't even hesitate. He unzipped his black jacket and held it out to a wide-eyed Jonathan, "Here, take mine." He shook the material gently and he watched as Jonathan snapped out of his surprise and shook his head immediately.

"No, I really shouldn't," Jonathan protested, "it probably costs more than my entire wardrobe and I don't want to dirty it."

Steve shook his head, "I trust you with it," he said simply. "Come on, Byers, I felt the chill when Jenny opened the door from over here. Just wear it. I promise it doesn't smell."

Jonathan shook his head again, taking a step back and adjusting his vest, "N-no, I'll be fine. I'll move around a lot so that I don't feel the—"

Steve held open the jacket, giving Jonathan a gentle smile, "Please," he stared Jonathan in the eyes, "Please just take it." He shook it again, holding it open for the younger man to just slide his arms on in.

He waited with bated breath, so unsure of how this would go. Would

Jonathan just leave? Walk into the cold theater and not look back? Steve watched as Jonathan finally unclenched and slowly walked towards him.

He released his breath, watching Jonathan turn away from him, sliding his arms behind him and Steve slipped the black jacket over his small frame, stepping back to admire him in it as Byers turned to face him.

With their height difference, the jacket was a bit long on the blonde but it didn't look bad. Nowhere near it. The hem of the jacket hit past his waist and even the sleeve cuffs were slipping over his wrists but...

"You look better in it than I do," Steve said softly, seriously.

"You're ridiculous," Jonathan whispered, playing with the zipper nervously and tugging the material close to his chest. He licked his lips and Steve was once again focused on that mouth. Seriously, Byers had to have the most amazing pair of lips-

"I should go inside," the blonde spoke, interrupting Steve's thought, "Um, I'll be out around five thirty."

"I'll be right here," Steve promised, leaning back onto his car with his foot propped onto the passenger door, his smile soft as Jonathan nodded, his own lips curved into that gorgeous smile. "Have a good day, Jonathan."

"You too, Steve," Jonathan turned to open the door. He paused, turning to smile that warm smile that left Steve yearning to see more of it, before he disappeared inside.

Steve grinned to himself, still over the moon about the fact that Jonathan Byers was wearing *his* jacket. That had to mean a step in the right direction. Weeks ago, Jonathan would have ripped the material off and ran away.

But that soft smile, those sweet dimples on those magnificent cheekbones, and the way he gripped the fabric tightly around his chest...he enjoyed wearing the jacket as much as Steve enjoyed seeing him in it.

“I’d burn that once he gives it back.”

The deep voice, cold and low, startled Steve and he looked to his left. The man, obviously older, walked around the corner and flashed him a sort of grim smile. He had grey eyes, and dark hair that was slightly curly. He was wearing the same uniform as Jonathan, one hand shoved into the black pants pocket and the other holding onto a lit joint.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, confused, “burn what?”

“The jacket you just lent to Byers,” the man said with narrowed eyes. “Burn that shit once he gives it back to you.”

Steve frowned, crossing his arms, “Why would I do that?” Who the fuck was this guy? A coworker of Jonathan’s? He had to be in his damn twenty’s, why was he even starting a conversation?

The man shrugged, taking a deep inhale of the joint, “Just some advice, man. Byers is dirty, you don’t want to go around rolling with him.”

Something started to hum in his chest. It itched. Steve didn’t like it. “Dirty?” he repeated the word, not liking the way this man seemed to associate it with his friend, “what exactly do you mean by that?”

“He hasn’t told you.” The man said, chuckling as he shook his head. “Yeah, the little slut didn’t tell me until I was nearly inside of him too.”

The humming became a full blown growl and Steve dug his fingers into the meat of his bicep, his jaw clenching hard enough to hurt. The foul name this man had called Jonathan echoed in his head and then the latter part of the statement caught up with him.

“...You’re Eric,” Steve realized at once, watching as Eric took another puff, “You’re the guy he was involved with.”

“*Almost* involved with,” Eric said casually, his voice throaty as he held in the marijuana for a while. He blew it out through his nostrils, smiling lazily, “Never fucked him, thank god. Who knows what kind of disease I would have gotten.” He closed his eyes, that fucking

stupid smile widening, “hell of a tight hole, though.”

Fury erupted in Steve’s chest like he’d never felt before. He pushed himself off of his car with his foot, standing up to his full height and walking towards the older man. He was glad to note that he had at least an inch and a half on the fucker and he glared down at him. “You fucking watch your mouth,” he said tightly, “I don’t know what the story is but you’re not going to disrespect my friend right to my face.”

Not at all intimidated, Eric merely chuckled, “Look kid,” he began, voice annoyingly placid, “You want to fuck the little bitch, go right ahead. Make sure you strap up, yeah? He’s got a gorgeous face and a mouth like you wouldn’t believe but don’t let that *tainted, filthy-*”

Steve recoiled.

The joint fell onto the ground and Eric followed down after, grasping onto his nose with both hands. He let out a low grunt of pain, glaring up at Steve with watery eyes. “What the fuck?” he garbled, and Steve could see blood dripping down in between the cracks of his long fingers. ‘

Steve glared back, slowly squatting down to meet eyes with the asshole. He stared, eyes narrowing as Eric shuffled back. What a pussy. “You keep his name out of your mouth,” he said seriously, voice firm, “don’t you mention him. Don’t look at him, don’t even *think* a bad thought about Jonathan Byers. You got me?”

Eric snorted, flicking his hand. Steve didn’t have to look to know that the concrete was now stained with crimson. He kept his eyes on Eric, smoothly standing back to his full height as the man got up, one hand still cupping his nose.

“His pussy must be good,” Eric drawled from behind his hand, “for you to be so willing to be ruined by him.” He took a step back as Steve glared, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, man. Byers is used goods, much more than you realize.” He walked off, opening the theater door and stepping in, letting it slam shut behind him.

Steve inhaled deeply through clenched teeth, and shook the sting

away from his hand. Fucking hell. Where the fuck did that asshole get off saying that shit? Just because he'd been intimate with Jonathan...had kissed his lips, touched his body, and almost...

Snarling, Steve turned and kicked his tire. It was blatantly stupid and pain immediately blossomed into his foot but he didn't even react to it. He turned again and stared at the building, hesitant to leave Jonathan knowing that Eric was also working inside.

But he couldn't very well just go inside and drag Jonathan out. No matter how much he really wanted to.

"I'll see him later," Steve told himself as he walked towards his car door. He jerked it open and sat down heavily, turning the key and listening to the thrumming of the engine. He would see Jonathan in a few hours.

And they were going to talk.

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Notes for the Chapter:

I got my chapters mixed up, folks! The next couple of chapters are the ones where all the angstiness starts happening, sorry to the confusion!

Also, I'm nearly wrapped with this story and I have a question for you all.

I've got like A LOT of smutty ideas floating around my head and I wondered if you would all prefer them to be lengthy one-shots (very lengthy) or a series of small drabbles in the same group? The detail will still be there, just shorter.

What do you think?

And they will be VERY smutty. I'm talking rimming, blowing, biting, rough, sweet, etc pwp because I just need some, honestly. I love in-depth love between these boys as much as the next person but sometimes

I just want PORN, people.

Okay, let me know. Thanks for reading! <3

6. We Broke a Barrier Together

Steve was wrong.

His jacket did smell but it smelled so *good*.

Jonathan sat in the break room, his head resting on top of his folded arms. The soft sleeves tickled at his nose and he inhaled deeply, his eyes closed peacefully. He'd actually dozed off for the first fifteen minutes of his break, the smell of Steve's cologne lulling him into a sense of complete calm.

He opened his eyes at the sound of someone stepping into the room and he lifted a hand, waving at two employees that were working concession today. They returned the wave and sat a few chairs away, immediately falling into a conversation.

Jonathan turned his head to the left, fully intent on using his remaining time to continue his cat nap. His coworkers kept their voices low, but that wasn't enough to keep him from tensing up as soon as they mentioned a certain name.

"...see Eric? He came back from his smoke break with a busted nose."

Jonathan disguised his stunned gasp as a cough as he leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head and trying his best to appear nonchalant. He kept his gaze on the row of lockers, staring at number 11, the locker he'd chosen as his own, while eavesdropping on his coworkers.

"No way! What happened?"

"He didn't say anything to me but I saw him in our bathroom a few hours ago. The sink was full of water and it was red from the blood coming off of his face. Someone totally wrecked him." The coworker grunted, "Didn't even bother to clean it. Arnie is going to be so pissed if the sink gets stained."

Jonathan blinked hard and glanced down at his watch. He had ten minutes left of his break. It would be plenty of time. He stood up,

adjusting Steve's jacket, and nodded to his coworkers, leaving the room as calmly as he could.

As soon as he closed the door behind him, he turned on his heel and began to walk quickly in the direction of the employee bathroom. He pushed open the door once he got there and quickly turned.

He stared at the sink, slowly walking over to it. He looked down at the porcelain, taking note of the red tint that surrounded the white bowl. He'd been so distracted that he didn't even realize that he never checked the stall and Jonathan raised his head quickly at the sound of a toilet flushing.

He stared into the mirror, his eyes widened as the familiar face stared back at him and he turned around quickly, watching as Eric glared at him from where he stood, his fingers curled tightly around the stall door and a rag and cleaning supplies in his other hand.

The bridge of his nose was completely red, the bottom of his eyes swelled up with the force of how hard he'd been hit. There was a small red stain on his button-up and Jonathan realized with a swallow that it was *blood*.

"Bet if you had a camera you'd take a picture."

Jonathan blinked at the sound of Eric's voice. It was very nasally, obviously due to the fact that his nose was pretty much re-arranged. He shrugged, shoving his hands into the pockets of Steve's jacket, watching as Eric began to spritz some cleaner onto the sink. "I wouldn't waste film on you."

"Never stopped you before," Eric replied smugly, eyes flashing, "Pretty sure I even took a picture of you that night." He shook his head, eyeing Jonathan up and down with clear disgust, "I remember thinking how gorgeous you were...such a fucking waste." He turned back to the sink, scrubbing his own blood away with the rag.

Jonathan's shoulders tensed.

"You've got great taste in music for someone so young," Eric remarked as he flipped through Jonathan's tapes.

Jonathan smiled, wiping the lens of his camera clean, "Thanks."

The camera was gently pried out of his hands and Jonathan looked up, eyes wide as Eric aimed the camera at him with a smirk. "Don't!" he protested, a grin on his face as he raised his hand a tad too late. He knew he had just been caught on film.

"A shame for you to not be in many pictures," Eric said softly, setting the camera down on Jonathan's nightstand gently, "Figured I'd make the photographer the subject." He stepped closer to Jonathan, staring down at him with intense eyes, "You're too beautiful to not be in portraits."

Jonathan inhaled in surprise as warm lips pressed against his mouth and he made a quiet noise in the back of his throat as a big hand crept underneath his sweater. He felt the cool palm glide over his bare abdomen and he arched, mouth falling open wide as a slick tongue forced its way inside.

His hands came up to wrap around Eric's neck and he moaned quietly, feeling that hand slide down to the button on his jeans. Eric pushed against him, never breaking their kiss, knocking Jonathan onto his bed and following him down.

Long fingers popped open his button and pulled down his zipper and Jonathan clenched his eyes shut, throwing his head back as those long fingers wrapped around his cock. "Eric," he breathed, heart hammering against his chest. He could feel the older man pressing slow and heated kisses against his throat and he shuddered, whining softly.

"Fuck, you're hot," Eric rumbled, his mouth sealing over Jonathan's neck and sucking hard. He ran the pad of his thumb over the leaking slit of his cock and Jonathan's hips rose, a cry leaving his throat and bouncing off of the walls.

He heard Eric mumble a curse and he heard the sound of a cap being popped off of something and then he shivered as Eric's fingers, cold and coated with liquid, touched at his skin again. The slender fingers slipped low and Eric's mouth sucked hard on his throat.

So you want to be a queer, do you?

Jonathan's eyes snapped open. Fear coiled in his lower belly and he tensed, his hands clenching tightly into the material of Eric's leather jacket even as one of the older man's fingers was sliding slowly into his-

You'd better get used to this boy, because this is what men are going to do to you if you decide to be queer.

"Eric," Jonathan gasped, pushing the older man's shoulders. He swallowed hard at Eric's confused grunt, wincing as that finger was pulled out, and quickly stood up, zipping himself back up and lowering his sweater back into place. He shuddered, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Jonathan," Eric murmured, reaching over to embrace the trembling teenager, "What is it? I thought-"

"I'm sorry," Jonathan spoke up, watery eyes wide as he looked up at Eric. "I-I'm sorry, I-"

"What is it?" Eric cooed, pressing his forehead on top of Jonathan's hair, "You were enjoying yourself...I was too. What happened? Did I go too fast?"

"N-no, I just...I'm sorry," Jonathan whispered, hiding his face against Eric's chest. "I'm too scared. I've...I've done..." He shook his head, not wanting to remember, "N-no one knows. I've never told anyone."

"Tell me," Eric nudged, "you can tell me. Come on, I'm sorry I pushed you too far." He rubbed Jonathan's back. "Tell me what happened."

Jonathan shook his head.

"Have you done this before?" and Eric seemed kind of upset. "You're not a virgin?"

Jonathan knew he shouldn't have said anything. He knew it. But Eric... Eric was so gentle with him. So careful and soft. So Jonathan told him.

It had been a mistake to tell him.

"You're fucking disgusting," Eric seethed, pacing the floor of Jonathan's room. "You're fucking filthy and I can't believe I was considering putting my dick inside of you."

Jonathan sat motionless, staring into nowhere. Tears were streaming down his face, dripping off of his chin. His left eye was swelled shut, the force that Eric used to hit him not unlike the force his father used to use on him.

"I bet you fucking let it happen," Eric snarled, grabbing Jonathan's chin and sneering down at him, "Honestly, it sounds like you didn't even try to fight back."

More tears slid down his face to land on Eric's wrist. "I was ten," he whispered, voice small, "And there were three of them. I didn't know how to fight back." He winced as Eric shoved his face away. Looking up, Jonathan attempted to speak and was quickly silenced by a crude backhand to the mouth.

"Don't you fucking speak," Eric growled, "You're tainted trash." He leaned his face close to Jonathan's, "Anytime you touch someone, you probably leave a layer of filth on them." He grunted, "Fuck knows I probably have it all over me."

"Eric," Jonathan whispered, "I'm sorry. I-let me try again. We'll go slower-"

"Fuck that," Eric muttered. He turned to go, pausing in the doorway. "Byers," he said tightly, "Do everyone around you a favor, would you? Don't fucking touch them. You are dirty in every way," he shook his head, "Unbelievable." He left, slamming the door closed.

"There you go," Eric's mocking coo brought Jonathan back to himself and he frowned, swallowing down to urge to whimper. "There's that memory." He smirked, shaking his head as he dropped the soiled rag into the trash can, "I sure hope you tell your new boyfriend about how used up you are. He cares now that he doesn't know, but when he finds out?" he made a hissing noise with his teeth, walking slowly around Jonathan, "He's a scrapper. Your face won't be so pretty after, I bet."

He stared in confusion as Eric bypassed him, opening the door and ducking out without another word.

Boyfriend?

Jonathan raised the sleeve of Steve's jacket, staring down at his wrist watch. He had to be back in the front to sell tickets in two minutes. He wandered out of the bathroom, playing with the cuff of the black jacket absent-mindedly.

What the hell did Eric mean by boyfriend?

--

"You know, I lied about this earlier," Steve mentioned, bored as he watched Barb and Nancy gush over a coat. "Why is it that only the boring lies come true for me?"

"Maybe you should lie about having to go see Jonathan," Nancy offered, grinning as she gently shoved Barb into a dressing room, the taller girl's arms loaded with coats of different colors and fabrics, before she turned to quirk a brow at Steve, "Maybe then you'll actually get to see him."

"I *did* see him," Steve stuck his tongue out at her, "and I'm going to see him again tonight, so ha."

Nancy blinked, quickly hurrying over to Steve, "How has he been? Anytime I call his house his mom says he's either working or sleeping."

"He seems to be okay," Steve glanced around the store, grimacing as a saleswoman a few feet away sprayed a sample of some fruity smelling perfume onto a slip of paper to hand to guests.

God, the smells were making his head hurt. "After dodging me for a whole damn week I finally got him to hang out and it's been amazing, Nancy." He grinned at the curious girl, "he's looking me in the eyes now and we're actually going to be hanging out a lot more."

"Has he let you touch him?"

The question was simple, but it immediately put a damper on Steve's mood.

"No," he answered, lowering his voice as Barb slipped out of the dressing room. "But I think I know why now." He slid an easy smile

onto his face as Barb walked over to them.

"I can't decide between the red one and the green one," Barb told them, peering at them from behind her glasses. She held them up, "What do you guys think?"

"I'd say red," Nancy nodded, "You could match it with so many more options." She turned to Steve, staring at him pointedly even as he snorted.

"Totally," Steve said, nodding distractedly as he looked over at the clock hanging from the wall in the store. "Do you ladies mind speeding it up?"

"You've got a date, Harrington?" Barb asked, putting the green coat back in its proper rack and arching a fine brow at him.

"I promised Dustin I would give him a ride to the arcade," Steve said, "his bike has got a flat tire," he informed them and Nancy nodded.

"Yeah, Mike mentioned that to me earlier. You're probably going to end up giving them all a ride and then when you get there, they'll totally want you to play with them a while."

Steve shrugged, "Well, baby Byers and El are with Joyce so she's probably going to drop them off but as for the rest, I don't mind." He grinned at her, "Keeps me out of the house until my *date*," he shot Barb a smug wink, "at five-thirty."

"Poor girl," Barb teased, turning away from them to go towards the checkout as Steve rolled his eyes at her back.

Nancy stayed behind, smiling up at Steve.

"Thanks for being there for him, Steve," she sighed, "I wish I had more time. I want to see him more often."

"Now that he's agreed to not Houdini me, I'll get us all together," Steve promised her, "I just want to get him completely comfortable around me first." He smiled at Barb as she came back, a large bag in her arms, "Okay, ladies. Let's get you home, I've got a brat pack to pick up."

He'd walked with Nancy to Barb's car and they said goodbye to the girl before Steve drove Nancy home. As soon as he got there, he hauled Mike, Lucas and Max into his car and then drove straight for Dustin's house, who was eagerly waiting on the front porch.

"You're going to stay for a while, right?" Dustin demanded as soon as he jumped into the car, buckling himself in, and Steve nodded with an easy grin on his face, "Good, because I bet Lucas my chocolate pudding for the next *two* weeks that I can beat you at any game."

"You are going to be a very unhappy kid for the next two weeks then," Steve smirked, listening to Lucas cackle in the backseat.

He parked at the arcade, smiling as he saw Joyce standing in front of the building with Will and Eleven at her side.

"Hi, Steve," she greeted him with a hug and Steve hugged back, smiling at her as he pulled back.

"I'm going to stay here with the pack and kill some time before going to pick up Jonathan," he winked playfully at her, "Don't wait up, he'll be home late."

"You've been so good to him, Steve," Joyce told him, her smile soft and sweet, "Jonathan has been so closed off the last couple of years, you know? He's so much happier now and I know that it's because of you."

Steve felt his cheeks warm, "Honestly, Mrs. Byers--"

"Joyce," she corrected him, wagging her brows playfully.

"*Joyce*," he amended, grinning, "I'm much more happier too. Jonathan is," he paused, licking his lips, "Jonathan is amazing."

"He is," Joyce murmured, eyes bright as she gazed up at him. She gave him another hug and then turned to the pack, "I'm picking you guys up in two hours, okay? Will, you're going to have to sit on someone's lap."

"Why me?" Will whined and he pouted as Eleven laughed, poking him in the shoulder.

"It's because you're the smallest," she teased and Will stuck his tongue out at her. Steve grinned at them and then opened the arcade door.

"Let's go, brats! Dustin has a bet to lose."

--

"Smoke?" Steve offered, holding the pack out to Jonathan. There was one dangling from his own lips, already lit as he inhaled the nicotine deeply. They were sitting out in his backyard, him sitting on a pool chair and Jonathan sitting at the edge of the pool, black pant leg pulled up just a bit and his left foot sliding in the water.

The sun was just beginning to set and there was a nice breeze, perfect weather for an evening to relax in the yard. Steve had rolled the sleeves of his blue flannel up to his elbows and he watched Jonathan shake his head at the offer of the cigarette.

Jonathan was still wearing his jacket, Steve noticed. And he still looked fantastic in it. He had pulled off his vest and unbuttoned his white shirt, the smooth skin of his throat a very welcoming sight. Byers had nice skin...

"I don't smoke," Jonathan murmured, watching the smoke curl out of Steve's mouth. "I told you this already." He took a drink of pop, "I don't like having to depend on something to feel a certain way."

"Hm," Steve hummed, taking another drag. He tossed the pack onto the floor besides his chair and then exhaled, blowing more smoke into the air before turning to wink at Jonathan, "Hell, neither do I. I just think it makes me look hot." He leaned back against the pool chair, inhaling deeply again.

Jonathan was silent for a few seconds before he said, "It does."

Wait. What?

Steve almost swallowed his cigarette. He coughed, beating hard on his chest, "Jesus Christ, Byers," he wheezed, his vision blurry, "warn a guy next time you want to make a joke." He sat up, coughing harder.

"No, I," Jonathan's cheeks reddened, "I wasn't trying to make a-" he shook his head, "never mind." He took another drink, a longer one this time and Steve peered at him, eyebrows raised.

What in the hell...? Was that seriously Jonathan's way of *flirting*? Steve couldn't help the dumb grin that spread across his lips. Shit, he was so bad at it. How could Jonathan be so cute?

"So, your brother is pretty good at video games," he told Jonathan, who looked over at him with interest. "I hung out with him and the rest of the litter for a while earlier. He's really good at Pac-Man."

Jonathan smirked, "Bless him for still practicing." At Steve's curious hum, he elaborated, "Before I started working, he and I would go to the arcade together every Sunday. I would always beat his score at Pac-Man but now that I never get a chance to play, he's probably trying to hone his skills."

"I'd say he's got that handled," Steve grinned, "Scored a six thousand nine hundred on his first go."

Jonathan snorted, giggling just a bit, "My best is thirteen thousand and one hundred." He took a sip from his pop, grinning as Steve whistled.

"Bless him indeed," Steve laughed.

They sat in silence for a while after that, Jonathan swinging his foot lazily in the water, taking occasional sips of pop and the other boy smoking idly while sprawled out on the pool chair. Steve tapped the ash off of his cigarette, silently mulling over how to approach Jonathan with what had happened today.

That fucker, Eric...

He could still feel the sting in his knuckles, could still remember the *crunch* that echoed around the air, but most of all he could remember the foul slander he was using against his-

"Are you okay?"

Steve looked to Jonathan, confused.

The younger man was staring at him with concerned eyes, glancing to the cigarette in his hand and Steve followed his gaze. The cigarette was dropping ash onto his knuckles, a tiny little stub dangerously close to burning him, and Steve sighed, dropping the depleted cigarette and crushing it with the tip of his sneaker.

“Can I ask you something?” Steve began, seeing the way Jonathan nodded without hesitating and feeling bad for what he was about to ask for. “About Eric?”

Jonathan tensed. “He’s an asshole,” he murmured, setting down the can and resting his elbow on his raised knee, “there’s not much to talk about.”

“I met him. He was outside, smoking at the side of the building. He said some shit to me after you went inside the theater,” Steve said and he sat up quickly at the suddenly terrified look on Jonathan’s face, “Jonathan, wait-”

“It makes sense now.” What made sense? “It was you, wasn’t it?” Jonathan said as he stood, his eyes wide and his hands raking through his hair, “You hit him. You busted up his nose earlier,” he swallowed loudly, shaking his head and catching Steve’s eyes, “Why? Did he tell you? God, Steve, do you *know*?”

“No, listen,” Steve stood as well, walking over to the younger man. He held his hands up pleadingly as soon as Jonathan began to back away, his face pale, “I don’t know anything,” he said quickly, “He was just calling you all sorts of foul names and I didn’t like it-”

“Names,” Jonathan echoed, and the look on his face was enough to make Steve’s chest being to ache, “He told you the truth then.” His eyes were becoming watery and he nodded to himself, biting savagely into the skin of his lip. “This was nice,” he whispered, nodding as if he was confirming something to himself, “fun while it lasted.”

Steve shook his head, alarmed when Jonathan shrugged out of the black jacket. He stared, eyes wide as Jonathan held the material out to him, not looking at him. Not letting their eyes meet, like before. He panicked, “No, what are you-”

“Just,” Jonathan murmured, and his voice was *wrecked* and Steve wanted so badly to erase the last five minutes, “just please don’t tell Nancy. I promise I’ll make sure she doesn’t touch me but I don’t want to lose more people.”

“You’re not losing anyone, Byers!” Steve didn’t mean to shout but he couldn’t help it, “Jonathan, you’re not losing *me*.” He reached out, letting his fingertips graze Jonathan’s cheek and he winced at the same time that Jonathan did, dropping his hand immediately. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s my fault,” Jonathan murmured, visibly upset. He bit that damn lip again, “You just shouldn’t touch me. You don’t need to get dirty-”

“*Dirty*?” Steve picked his head up and stared hard at Jonathan, “What the hell are you talking about? Why would I get dirty?” There was that fucking word again. The same one that Eric had used as a slur to Jonathan.

But why did Jonathan use it? Did he seriously believe that-

Jonathan frowned, “Nothing, never mind.” He turned his gaze away; and Steve just knew that the walls were going to come up again.

Nuh uh. Not this time.

Steve shook his head, “No, why would you say that?”

“It’s noth-”

“Bullshit,” Steve said fiercely, “why the hell would you say that to me?” He took a step closer, “Eric said that shit to me also. Is that what that fucker told you? Is he the one that put that in your head?”

“Stop,” Jonathan hissed, closing his eyes. His fists were white with how hard he was holding on to Steve’s jacket, his knuckles probably losing feeling.

“Is that why you don’t let people touch your skin?” Steve pressed, glaring at Jonathan as the pale blonde shot him a look of desperate anger, “because you think you’re *dirty*?”

"It's none of your business!" Jonathan said angrily, shoving the jacket hard into the taller boy's stomach and turning away.

Steve grabbed the bundled up clothing, tossing it onto a pool chair without a care.

"None of my-" Steve walked ahead of the younger male, incredulous as he stared him down. Jonathan stared back, his eyes narrowed and his lips pressed together tightly. "None of my business!? Are you fucking kidding me right now? Byers-"

"You don't know me!" Jonathan yelled, his eyes lit up with his fury and an angry red flush creeping up his pale neck. He didn't seem to realize just how close they were. It was the closest he'd ever gotten to Jonathan without the younger man wincing, Steve realized.

"I know that you think you're disgusting!" Steve shot back, his own anger vibrating in his chest, "I know you think you're dirty and that you don't like to be touched because you think you're tainting people, but you're wrong." His voice softened as he noticed the wetness in Jonathan's eyes. The trembling of his body, his quivering lips, "You're wrong, Jonathan."

He reached out to the shaking boy, eyes open and warm.

"Don't," Jonathan begged, stepping back but Steve wasn't about to let him run. He kept walking, slowly, and Jonathan kept taking steps back. It didn't take long for Jonathan's back to meet the wall and Steve stopped only inches away, his chest bumping Jonathan's just slightly.

"I'm going to touch you," Steve said, watching the way Jonathan's eyes widened in alarm. "And you're going to let me." He raised his hand, his fingers flexing as he moved to touch Jonathan's.

"Please," Jonathan begged, "Steve, don't." His breath hitched and he closed his eyes, trying to blend into the wall behind him but Steve pressed on. He had to show Jonathan. To let him know that he could touch and *be* touched and that he was not fucking dirty.

His fingers slid over the soft, warm palm and he let out a breath,

staring into Jonathan's eyes as they slowly opened. "Your skin is soft," Steve whispered, awed, "and so warm." Slowly, so slowly, he raised their joined hands to his face.

"Do you see?" Steve asked, his thumb running over Jonathan's knuckles, "There's nothing there. I'm not dirty because *you* are not dirty."

Jonathan looked pained, his mouth opening but no words escaping.

Steve turned their wrists, so that the back of Jonathan's hand was facing him and keeping his eyes locked on the younger man's, he lowered his head, kissing that warm skin gently. He locked his fingers tight at the stunned gasp and at the sight of the tears falling from Jonathan's face. He wouldn't let go.

"You're wrong, Jonathan," Steve repeated his words from earlier. He reached up slowly, touching Jonathan's cheeks lightly, "you are not tainted. Whatever that fucker told you or whatever happened to you, nothing will make you tainted." His voice lowered and he pressed his forehead down against Jonathan's, holding their gaze, "not to me, beautiful."

"Steve," Jonathan whispered, broken and lost. His hands, shaking uncontrollably, slowly lifted. His fingers wrapped around Steve's wrists tentatively and he held them tight, his eyes closing as he leaned up into the taller boy.

They stayed that way for a few seconds, Steve whispering gentle reassurances into Jonathan's face, when the sudden sound of a car beeping outside, from the direction of his front yard, caused them both to jump.

Steve slowly released the smaller male and frowned, staring over at his house. "Shit. Who the fuck is that?" he bit lip and looked back to Jonathan.

Jonathan stared back at him, hands still raised and closed slightly, as if still holding onto...onto *him*.

"Wait for me," Steve begged, reaching out to grab Jonathan's hand and squeeze briefly, "please don't leave." He waited until Jonathan

nodded hesitantly before he rushed inside of the house using the sliding back door, making his way quickly over to the front of the house. He jerked the front door open, not knowing exactly who to expect.

Cold blue eyes greeted him and Steve frowned, moving to shut the door. He clenched his teeth when a foot stomped against the door, halting its progress, "Get the fuck out of here, Hargrove."

Damn it all, this was the last thing that Steve needed.

"You kidding me?" Billy grunted, shoving the door hard against Steve's cheek. He made his way inside, turning and glaring into Steve's face. "Where the fuck have you been?"

Steve rubbed the side of his face before crossing his arms, "Here and there," he answered vaguely, "don't know why you give a shit seeing as we're done."

"And when did I say we were done?" Billy asked, voice low and dangerous and he stepped closer to Steve. Steve glared, not the least bit afraid.

"You don't get a say, you son of a bitch," Steve said tightly, "you could have fucking killed us that night. Driving drunk. Speeding. You fucking left me out there in the dark while I was buzzed and bleeding." He scoffed, shaking his head. "The fuck do you care anyway? It's not like you love me."

"This isn't about loving you," Billy sneered, "you're mine. It'll stay that way until I get bored of you. You're nothing without me, Harrington."

Steve grit his teeth, remembering Jonathan's gentle words, "*You're* nothing, you asshole. Get the fuck out!"

The blow came from nowhere and it knocked him off of his feet. Fuck, Billy always did move fast. He crashed back hard into the floor, swallowing down his blood so as to not spit it onto the carpet.

He grimaced, his hand coming up to his jaw. The inside of his mouth throbbed with pain and he figured he'd managed to cut his cheek

with how hard Billy's damn ring had caught him.

"Get up," Billy ordered, face tight as he rolled the sleeves of his denim jacket up his forearms, "let's hurry up and get this stupid little fight where I kick your ass out of way so that we could-"

The sound of the glass door sliding open caused Billy to pause and Steve to look up.

"Steve?"

Billy turned his head at the sound of Jonathan's concerned voice and Steve watched the fury in those blue eyes ignite as Jonathan walked into sight, his face surprised as he took in Billy and then Steve sprawled out on the floor.

"Byers," Billy clenched his fist, "Mind telling me what the fuck you're doing in my boyfriend's house?"

"I'm not your boyfriend," Steve said immediately, feeling blood coat his mouth again. He brought the hem of his shirt up to his mouth, spitting into the fabric quietly. It left a deep red stain and when Steve looked up, he saw the way Jonathan's eyes zeroed in on the color, his beautiful face paling.

"God," Jonathan whispered, staring at the blood. He brought his eyes back to Billy when his collar was grabbed roughly. He stared up at the curly blonde and Steve stood quickly, moving towards them.

"Hargrove, leave him out of it," Steve said, grabbing Billy's wrist. He grunted in pain as Billy elbowed him in the solar plexus and he stumbled back, "Billy, damn it, leave him alone!"

Billy sneered, keeping his eyes on Jonathan's. "Since when did you give a shit about Byers?" he asked, pulling Jonathan's collar hard, their faces inches apart. "You've barely paid attention to him that past three years and now you're suddenly friends?"

Before Steve could answer, Jonathan did.

"What does it matter?" the younger man asked, eyes narrowed, "He doesn't have to answer to you, Billy, and you'll never make him."

Despite the situation, Steve found himself smiling fondly at his friend. The smile slipped from his face as Billy turned to stare at him and he grit his teeth as Billy leveled him with a dark stare before he turned back to Jonathan.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, Byers?” Billy seethed, and Steve could see his other hand fisting, “What makes you think I’ll let you get away with talking to me like that?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jonathan replied calmly, “You can kick my ass all over this house but it won’t change the fact that Steve doesn’t belong to you anymore.”

“Little bitch,” Billy growled, rearing his fist back.

Steve moved, grabbing onto Billy’s shoulder and tugging him back and away from Jonathan harshly. He turned around to face his ex and doubled over in pain as a fist rammed into his ribs. He breathed deeply through his nose, closing his eyes tightly as Billy started to talk.

“You’ve done it now, Harrington,” Billy snarled, “You’ll be nobody after this. Not only will no one recognize you with how *badly* I’m going to beat you, but you’ll be a fucking pariah without me.”

Steve closed his eyes tightly as Billy grabbed his shoulders and he clenched his stomach, fully expecting a knee to come crashing into his abdomen at any moment the same way he’d felt it happen many times before.

But it never came and Steve felt Billy’s fingers rip away from his skin with such force that Steve actually stumbled, falling onto his knees as he lost his balance. He looked up immediately, seeing that Jonathan had tackled the older blonde in the side.

It wasn’t even a full five seconds before Billy slammed his forehead into Jonathan’s temple, shoving him off brutally and climbing on top of him immediately. He reared his hand back, cuffing Jonathan across the cheek.

Steve scrambled to his feet and pulled Billy off of Jonathan again. He

balling up his fist and lurched it upwards, upper-cutting his ex as hard as he could. Billy stumbled back a few steps and then he was moving, pressing his hands against Steve's chest and shoving hard.

Steve felt his head bounce off of the wall and his vision went blurry for a few seconds. He heard Billy laugh and he looked up blearily, seeing stormy blue eyes glaring down at him. Shit, here it goes again.

Those blue eyes widened suddenly and then they were gone. Steve tilted his head as he heard a weird sound, sort of like a wet towel smacking into a window, and then a high-pitched yelp. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, willing the pain in the back of his skull to ebb.

He opened his eyes to see Jonathan with a forearm braced across Billy's throat, pinning him against the front door. Hargrove was breathing heavy, his eyes wide. Steve blinked hard, seeing that Billy's mouth was bent oddly and was leaking blood onto his denim jacket.

"You're done abusing him," Jonathan said, voice soft but every bit serious, "I'm not usually violent, Billy, but I promise you that if you ever try to hurt Steve Harrington again," his eyes glinted with promise as he applied pressure with his forearm, "I'll do more than just bust your jaw." Billy gagged, eyes wet as he struggled to breathe.

"J-Jonathan," Steve murmured, trying to stand. He fell back against the wall, his visions still fuzzy. "Just let him go," he murmured, eyes closing, "just...push him the fuck out." He heard the door being opened, the sound of something falling outside, and then the door closing with locks being put in place.

When he opened his eyes again, he was staring into Jonathan's bruised *beautiful* face. Those brown eyes were staring at him, worried, and Steve truly couldn't help himself.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," he joked and he could feel his insides glow as Jonathan let out a breathless laugh.

"You're such a dork," Jonathan whispered, head shaking.

And Steve smiled, resting his head back against the wall as he felt

Jonathan slide besides him.

Maybe it was the pain in the back of his head, or maybe it was the way that Jonathan was leaning against him, but Steve had never really felt this good after a fight.

This happy.

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Notes for the Chapter:

Yeah!

Take that, Billy!

Boyfriends protecting boyfriends. <3 “But if Jonathan is so tough why is he so scared or Eric?!” it’ll come, be patient with me.

I’m sure some of you already know where I’m going with this whole Lonnie thing...just be braced. It’s going to get graphic so read with caution.

7. You Let Me In, Like I Belonged There

They sat, side-by-side, bleeding and sore. Jonathan was resting his head on Steve's shoulder, the cut on his temple bleeding a few drops of red onto the blue flannel but Steve didn't seem to mind seeing as how he was using his hand to stroke Jonathan's hair soothingly.

He felt Steve's shoulder quaking slightly and his brows furrowed. He picked up his head with a small sound of pain, his temple throbbing, gazing over at Steve as the older boy pressed a hand to his side, gasping out a soft laugh even as his ribcage probably protested the action. He giggled as Jonathan stared at him in confusion.

"Are you having a fit?" Jonathan asked quietly, "Because I don't have the strength to drag you to the car and get you to the hospital." His lips quirked into a slight smile as Steve beamed at him and his eyes quickly traced over the swollen bottom lip.

That would need to be iced soon.

"You were leaning on me," Steve grinned lazily, "You were letting me touch your hair." He was right, Jonathan realized, humming softly. "And we broke each other's ex's faces today," he laughed again and Jonathan found himself smiling.

"He should never have hit you," he murmured, reaching out to thumb away some blood from Steve's lip. He stilled when the older male moved slightly, watching as Steve pressed a kiss to the pad of his thumb.

"He should have never made you believe you were dirty," Steve returned, gaze gentle as his eyes settled on Jonathan's. "Jonathan," he sat up a bit, wincing in pain, and Jonathan reached over, grabbing his forearms and steadying him as best as he could, "I need you to know that what I said earlier...I meant it. I don't care what Eric has said about you. I don't care about what you told him that made him upset enough to say such bullshit about you. I only care about *you*." He smiled slightly, "I really need you to know that."

"Steve," Jonathan was touched. He reached out, not even hesitating,

and he wrapped his arms tightly around Steve's shoulders in his first hug with anyone besides his mom or one of the kids in *months*.

Steve hugged back, sighing softly into his neck and Jonathan shivered as he spoke, "You hug like your mom does." Jonathan pulled away, gazing at him curiously, "With so much feeling. You are..."

Jonathan waited, nodding encouragingly even as Steve looked away, suddenly shy.

"You're so damn warm." Steve murmured, "You feel right." He shook his head, laughing at himself, "Shit, Byers. Why do you make me feel this way?"

Jonathan's cheeks reddened. "You fell back pretty hard," he murmured, "You might have a concussion."

"Nah," Steve said easily, "I just got my bell rung." He gazed at Jonathan thoughtfully, lips quirked.

"What?"

"Nothing," Steve replied, still smiling softly, "it's just...who would have thought? Jonathan Byers dislocating Billy Hargrove's jaw?" he chuckled to himself, and Jonathan smiled back, shrugging weakly.

"He was going to keep hurting you," the younger boy said simply, "I wasn't going to let that happen."

Jonathan picked himself up from the floor and went over to the fridge. He pulled open the freezer and reached inside, grabbing a bag of frozen carrots. He made his way back to Steve, holding out the bag, "Here," he said softly, grabbing Steve's hand and placing the frozen bag on his palm. He guided their joint hands to Steve's mouth.

"You let your skin touch his," Steve pointed out and Jonathan nodded, slowly lowering his hand away, "You let Lori touch you also." He tilted his head, "how come they got to before..." he sighed quietly, "Before I did?"

"I don't know," Jonathan admitted, staring down at his fist. His

knuckles were scuffed and he rubbed them soothingly, “Maybe I don’t care if they get dirty.” He truly didn’t give a damn if he tainted the pair of them.

Steve snorted, “They’re already dirty,” he lowered the frozen bag and reached out, cupping Jonathan’s cheek with his cool palm. Jonathan shivered as it made contact with his heated skin but he didn’t pull away, staring into Steve’s honest eyes.

“But *you* are not.” Steve murmured. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Jonathan wanted to say that he did but he said nothing instead. He smiled wanly at the older boy, positioning the cool hand, and bag, back onto the split lip. “Keep it on for a little while. Your lip won’t swell as badly.”

Steve complied, pressing the bag to his jaw and then moving to stand. He moved slowly, pointing towards the backyard again, “I’m going to go get the aid kit in my bathroom and after that, we’re going for a swim.” He headed over to the stairs.

Was Steve seriously going to move past what just happened this easily? Jonathan stared, watching as Steve slowly disappeared up the steps. Well, okay then. He wouldn’t dwell on this if Steve wouldn’t.

As he waited, Jonathan glanced over at the living room. He walked in, glancing at the framed pictures lining the wall. He paused at one, grinning at the sight of young Steve, smiling toothily at the camera while holding a basketball that looked way too big in his hands. Steve was a cute kid.

He turned his head, staring at another picture of Steve surrounded by a lot of people. His smile was clearly forced in the picture as he stood in between two other boys and three girls, with a row of taller kids behind them and the adults leading the background.

“Annual reunion,” Steve explained from behind him and Jonathan turned, seeing the older boy staring at the picture with no sense of happiness, “My cousins and aunts from both sides. I can’t stand any of them.” He held up the first aid kit, “Come on, I’ll take care of that cut.”

“How come you can’t stand any of them?”

Steve shrugged, “They’re all so boring. So hollow and fucking programmed to follow what their parents want for them.” He scoffed, “like perfect little robots.” He tapped the photo, pointing to the row of taller girls behind him, “One of them is having a baby. I have no clue which one,” he grinned at Jonathan, gently grabbing his shoulder and leading him to the couch, “and I don’t really care.”

Jonathan sat with him, gazing at him curiously, “Are your parents like theirs? Wanting you to do things that you have no interest in?” the couch was ridiculously comfortable. It was a nice cream color and Jonathan was slightly nervous about possibly leaving some sort of mark on it.

“Of course,” Steve huffed, angling the frozen bag so that he could talk comfortably, while popping open the kit with his other hand, “it’s like a damn family gene. They paid for me to learn to play the violin when I was six. I hated it and switched to guitar. *They* hated it and then turned me to sports.”

“Do they ever come to your games?”

“Nope.” Steve said flatly, popping the “p” pointedly. “It’s better off that way though. I don’t have to worry about impressing them so I end up doing pretty good. They just like bragging about the trophies to my relatives.” He grabbed a cotton swab and a small bottle of alcohol.

Jonathan nodded slowly, reflecting over how lucky he really was. Even with how little they had, his mother always made sure to take an interest in whatever her sons liked. She was the one who encouraged his photography. The one who bought Will his colored pencils and crayons. She framed their work, his photos and Will’s drawings, on the fridge and walls of their dingy little house. Those were *their* trophies and she loved them.

“I guess that’s why I thought you were creepy,” Steve spoke, voice soft as he lowered the frozen bag again. “I was so used to seeing people look the same and then I saw you,” his lips quirked, “so different. Your hair wasn’t styled the way I normally see boys style it.

Your clothes weren't designer brand or fit to frame and you were always alone."

Jonathan chuckled, "I'm pretty offended," he said playfully but the smile slipped from his face as Steve tossed the frozen bag onto the coffee table and turned to him, easing closer. He inhaled sharply at the serious and heated look in the older boy's brown eyes. He was coming even closer...

"Don't be," Steve whispered, "I didn't know it then, didn't see you enough to realize it but I see it now. It's so cliché...for me to only see it after all that's happened and call me corny all you want but you... you're so," Jonathan watched him swallow, licking his lips as Steve reached out, pushing away his bangs and letting his fingers trail lightly over the cut on his temple, "You're so god-damn gorgeous."

Jonathan blinked, not knowing what to say and watching as Steve quickly looked away and began to soak the cotton ball with alcohol. He winced as Steve dabbed at the cut on his temple, hissing quietly as the sting began to settle in.

"Just going to wrap it up," Steve said softly as he reached into the kit to grab a bandage. He placed it over the cleaned cut, rolling his thumb over the edges gently. He grabbed Jonathan's chin, staring at the bruise on his cheek with narrowed eyes. "Fucking Hargrove..."

"It's fine," Jonathan glanced at Steve's bottom lip. It didn't look too bad, there was a small cut at the edge from what he assumed was one of Billy's rings. "Are you in pain?" he picked up a small strip of gauze and very gently dabbed at the bottom lip.

"It's nothing," Steve replied, shaking his head. "My ribs ache a bit but it's nothing a good warm soak won't help." He smiled, a bit sardonically, "it's not the worst beating I've ever gotten from him."

Jonathan sighed, watching the way Steve eased back onto the couch. His face was impassive, but his eyes....

"Up," Jonathan demanded, moving off of the couch. He chuckled at the surprised look on Steve's face as he looked up at him.

"You said you wanted to swim," Jonathan reminded, smiling. He stood, offering a hand to Steve, "So let's go swimming."

--

"You're not seriously going to swim in your uniform."

Steve had already pulled his flannel off and was in the middle of grabbing the hem of the heather grey tank top he wore underneath when he noticed the way that Jonathan was staring at the water, not making any motion to remove his clothing at all.

The soft lighting in the backyard did nothing to hide Jonathan's nervous face. The moon was completely out now, full and bright. The air around them had settled and there was no wind but the temperature was still slightly cool.

It really was a good thing that the pool was heated.

Jonathan smiled weakly, brushing his hair away from his eyes. "I was planning on it, yeah." He sucked his lower lip into his mouth and Steve fought really fucking hard not to stare, "S-should I take off my shirt?"

"Well, obviously, Byers," Steve laughed. He pulled the tank top off, smiling encouragingly at Jonathan, whose eyes drifted towards his bare chest briefly before looking away with a familiar and always adorable stain across his nose, "Come on, there's no one here. It's just you and me."

"O-okay," Jonathan agreed, nodding his head. He exhaled slowly, and turned around, facing away from Steve. He could see from the movements of Jonathan's hands that he was unbuttoning the shirt. In seconds, the material parted and Jonathan let it slide off of his shoulders.

Oh.

Jonathan's skin was a lot paler in the soft lighting of the backyard. His lean body, hiding toned definition that no one ever got to see, was absolutely mesmerizing. The knobs of his spine were slightly visible, leading down to a V-taper on his lower back-

“Damn,” Steve breathed, feeling his jeans tighten.

He learned that Jonathan had dimples on his cheeks only a short few weeks ago.

He learned that Jonathan had dimples again just now.

On his lower back.

“What?” Jonathan turned his head, confused. He stared at Steve’s dumbstruck expression, “Steve?” he turned fully; his arms coming up cross over his chest modestly. “Are you okay?” he glanced around, seeing nothing, and then looking back to Steve with eyebrows raised.

Steve took his time nodding. “Um, yeah.” He smiled weakly, turning away so that Jonathan wouldn’t notice the fact that he was tenting his jeans quite obviously, “I’m good. I’m so good, I’m great.” He looked down at his pants, biting his tongue around a curse.

“Oh,” Jonathan still sounded confused but Steve didn’t dare turn around. “Okay then...are you ready to get in?” and Steve glanced back over his shoulder, seeing the blonde slowly sit on the edge, his black pants dipping into the water.

He watched as Jonathan inhaled deeply before pushing himself off the edge, submerging himself fully into the warm water. Steve took the chance to dive into the pool himself, going headfirst. He swam a few feet away and then burst through the surface, turning to find Jonathan floating on his back.

“The water feels incredible,” the blonde said, his eyes closed as he moved his fingers around the water lazily. Steve grinned, swimming over to the smaller male. He raised his hands and gently pushed Jonathan around, watching him float in a circle.

“We keep it warmed up during the winter months,” Steve explained, “I like coming in here after practice sometimes. It helps with soreness.”

“I bet,” Jonathan said, eyes still closed in content.

Steve smirked playfully and cupped a bit of water in his palm. He

poured it over Jonathan's chin and he chuckled at the way Jonathan's eyes opened to glare at him. "Want to race?" he challenged.

"Want to lose?" Jonathan drawled as he turned over. He waded over to one end of the pool, Steve following after him.

"Why are you so confident?"

Jonathan laughed, "I'm pretty good at swimming. It's one of my only skills." He stretched out his arms, wiping water away from his eyes as he looked at Steve. "On go?"

Steve nodded, "You've got plenty of skills," he said as he got ready. "You take great pictures, you apparently rock at Pac-Man, you can cook like no one's business."

"Go!"

Steve stared, eyes wide as Jonathan shot off. "Hey!" he dove into the water again, pumping his legs as fast as he could to catch up but it was no use. Jonathan had gotten a good head-start and he snorted as he met the grinning blonde at the other end.

"You also cheat," Steve grumbled, "which is a frowned upon skill."

Jonathan laughed as he swam to shallow end of the pool. He stood and turned, bracing his arms behind him, and jumped slightly, pulling himself up to sit at the edge of the pool again. His soaked black pants clung to his legs and he tilted his head back to look at the sky, panting softly.

Steve watched him, swimming over slowly until he was able to touch his feet to the bottom of the pool. He walked over to Jonathan, pausing for just a second before walking in between the other boy's parted knees.

"How are your ribs?" Jonathan asked quietly, water dripping down his face and Steve smiled gently at him, watching his eyes close as his hand reached over, brushing blonde wet bangs away from Jonathan's face. He was surprised that bandage stayed put and made a mental note to change it before dropping Jonathan off at home.

"I'm fine," Steve said, "stop worrying over me."

"Who else will?" Jonathan asked, half serious and half playful.

Steve shook his head, laughing, "You make a fair point, Jonathan." He rested his elbows on Jonathan's knees, staring up at him, "Are you okay with me being this close? You know, it wasn't all that long ago that you were dodging me left and right." He winked, "could have sworn it was just a few days ago, actually."

Jonathan's shoulders shook with his laughter, "It's fine, Harrington," he answered, his smile as bright as the moon, "I doubt I could get you to stay away from me anyway."

"You beat up my ex, the king of our school," Steve said, smirking, "I'm not letting you hide from me ever again."

"You completely broke my ex's nose," Jonathan reminded, "a guy five years older than you."

Steve smirked, "He's short for his age."

"He's taller than me," Jonathan objected, frowning.

"*You're* abnormally short for your age," Steve teased, just to see the beautiful lips turn to a pout, which they did, "I mean, look at your brother. Eleven and Max are taller than he is."

"Our mom is short," Jonathan said, smiling softly.

"Was your dad tall?"

The mention of his father caused Jonathan's entire body to tense and Steve could feel it. He frowned, easing off of Jonathan's knees slowly and staring at him in wonder. "Are you okay?" but Jonathan didn't answer.

He had a faraway look in his eyes and Steve murmured his name, watching as those brown eyes turned to stare at the water.

"No, he's," Jonathan shook his head, reaching up to brush a hand over his lips, "He was taller than me. A little bit taller than you." He

shrugged, "I don't really remember." Lonnie was a touchy subject then.

Steve decided to stray away from it. He watched a drop of water slide down one of Jonathan's sharp collarbones and he raised his hand, slowly collecting the droplet on his thumb and stroking the soft skin lightly.

"I like your skin," Steve murmured, looking up and watching the way Jonathan's eyes met his. "I..." he shook his head, trying to hide his smile, "Damn. You make me feel so unbalanced, Jonathan."

"I'm sorry," Jonathan whispered back, his eyes drifting down to Steve's chest.

"No, don't apologize," Steve insisted, slowly wrapping his arms around Jonathan's waist. He kept his embrace loose, afraid that Jonathan would flinch away. Instead, he felt wet fingers slowly glide up his forearms to rest softly against his shoulders.

"Is this okay?" Jonathan asked quietly and Steve felt his chest tighten at the look of soft desperation on the younger boy's face, "Can," he inhaled deeply, "can I touch you?"

The sounds from around them seemed so much louder with both of them looking at one another so intently. The gentle lapping of the water around their legs, the little drops slipping down their bodies to land on the edge of the pool, the soft sounds of the insects and little animals from the woods a few feet away...

And the sound of their heartbeats was echoing loudly in their ears as they stared at one another.

"Jonathan," Steve lowered his head, resting his temple against Jonathan's shoulder. He felt those fingers slide into the back of his hair, where they stroked so gently. "I don't want you to *stop* touching me."

They sat in their embrace for a few minutes, enjoying themselves more than they thought possible. Steve knew Jonathan wasn't about to say that he was cold, but he could feel the small shivers begin to

rock the younger boy.

“Come on,” Steve said, slowly unwinding his arms from Jonathan’s waist. He hefted himself up over the edge, cursing as his soaked jeans tried to keep him in the water. He helped Jonathan up, “I’ll lend you some clothes so we can order some food and watch some TV and then I’ll take you home. You’re probably tired from working and all that happened.”

An hour and a half later, Jonathan was in the passenger seat wearing one of Steve’s old basketball tees and a pair of grey pajama bottoms that were way too long on him and completely asleep. The seat was leaned back and even with a seatbelt on, the blonde had found a way to curl up sideways so that his knees were tucked against his chest.

Steve had just gotten done locking up the house and sliding into the driver’s seat of his BMW when he noticed that the blonde was asleep. It couldn’t have been more than five minutes that he was busy making sure the house was secure and Jonathan just knocks out on him?

He chuckled as he started up the car, pulling onto the road. He glanced at Jonathan, smiling fondly, before turning his eyes back to the road. The time spent with the younger man tonight had been fantastic. He’d touched him. He’d been close. He wanted to be closer...

And yet.

Steve frowned as he stared at the dark road. There had been something. Before Billy showed up, there was something that had Jonathan terrified. Something he was hiding that he was too afraid to say.

Eric had done it to him. Eric had broken something inside of Jonathan Byers and a huge part of Steve *hated* the cruel bastard for it.

“I told him something about myself that he really didn’t like.”

What could it have been? What made Jonathan so afraid? So afraid to even think...

“Why are you afraid to lose me?” Steve whispered, glancing over at Jonathan again. “Don’t you know by now? Don’t you feel it, Jonathan?” he shook his head, heart heavy as he looked forward again, “don’t you realize that I...I don’t want to be without you?”

He swallowed hard as he pulled up to the Byers residence. He glanced down at his watch, seeing that it was just after eleven thirty, and then looked back at the house. The lights were off but there was a dim glow from the window and Steve figured that it was probably a television.

He opened his car door slowly and walked out, closing it as silently as he could. He walked over to the passenger side, opening the door and bending down, “Hey, Jonathan,” he gently reached out, touching the fresh bandage on Jonathan’s temple first before gently cupping his soft cheek.

“Mm?” Jonathan hummed, licking his lips as his eyes slowly blinked open. He glanced around, blinking as the sight of Steve looming above him.

“Come on,” Steve said, smiling as he helped Jonathan out, “Let’s get you to bed.” He reached over to the backseat, grabbing onto the bag containing Jonathan’s uniform. He had chucked the clothing into his washer and then dryer while they ate the pizza he had ordered after their swim.

“I fell asleep?” Fuck, Jonathan was cute when he was disoriented. He rubbed his eyes, staring with bleary eyes at his house.

“Nah,” Steve answered, “you were just watching the inside of your eyelids.” He snickered at the dry look the smaller man shot him.

“Smartass,” Jonathan said, corners of his lips quirked. “Well, television is on,” he pointed out. “Mom is awake in there probably making out with Hopper.”

“Sexy,” Steve said, waggling his eyebrows and barking out a laugh at the immediate twitch that jerked Jonathan’s body. “Let’s go. You’re ready to fall asleep standing.” He swung his arm around Jonathan’s waist, leading him into the house.

Jonathan reached out, knocking lightly. The door opened seconds later, Hopper's face greeting them. "Hey, Hop."

"Boys," Hopper nodded. His frowned as he took in their bruised faces, "What happened?"

"Some drunk asshole was trying to write graffiti on the walls of the theater," Jonathan shrugged, "I saw him after I clocked out, tried to get him to stop, and Steve rolled up just in time to help."

Jonathan was also quite skilled at fibbing, it seemed.

Steve nodded, "Yeah, we got it handled. He looks worse." He grinned down at Jonathan, "Way worse." And Jonathan smiled back.

Hopper nodded, "Next time just stay clear, you never know if they have a weapon on them." He stood aside, letting them in and shutting the door behind them quietly. Joyce was sitting on the couch and there was some old movie playing on the television.

She turned to see them and her eyes lit up. "Hi, honey," she stood and rushed over, greeting her eldest with a kiss to the forehead. "How was work? Did you two have fun?" her eyes searched his face, "Oh, what happened?" she asked, seeing the bruises.

She looked over at Steve and her eyebrows rose as she turned to cup his chin, "Oh, Steve, you too?"

"I'm fine," Steve waved a hand, smiling at the woman. He accepted her hug eagerly, feeling himself melt. Honestly, where did the Byers learn to hug so well? They should give his parents some lessons.

"Hopper will fill you in," Jonathan said, glancing down the hall. "Will and El are sleeping?"

"Yeah, they nodded off about an hour ago. You go on to bed, honey, I know you've had a long day." Joyce shooed him away and Jonathan looked at Steve, motioning for him to follow.

"Goodnight," Steve said to them before trailing after Jonathan. He popped into the room after him, watching Jonathan toe off his shoes and immediately plop himself onto the bed. Seriously, why was he so

cute?

“Well, I guess I’ll see you later?”

“You’re going back home? To your empty house?” Jonathan asked, voice muffled with his cheek pressed against his pillow.

Steve tilted his head, hands in the pockets of his plaid pajama pants, “Well, yeah?” he pulled his hands out of his pockets and crossed his arms, rocking on the balls of his feet, “What else am I going to do?”

Jonathan opened his eyes, staring up at Steve sleepily. He smiled softly, moving over and making room.

He was making room for Steve *join* him.

“Stay,” Jonathan whispered. His eyes slipped closed again and he smiled, “My curtains do a pretty good job of keeping out the sunlight.”

“Tempting,” Steve said, grinning. He sat at the edge of the bed, tugging off his sneakers, then his shirt, and eased back, sighing softly as the dull ache at his ribs crept up. “Will you make me pancakes in the morning?”

“Mmhmm,” Jonathan mumbled tiredly.

“I want eggs too.”

“Sure.”

Steve closed his eyes, smiling, “You know, the last time I tried to get you to sleep in your own bed with me; you thought it would be creepy-”

“Steve, shut up.” Jonathan said and threw an arm gently over Steve’s sternum. He stroked his thumb over the naked side slowly and Steve damn near forgot to breathe.

“Okay,” Steve whispered, staring up at the ceiling. He licked his lips and then closed his eyes, feeling those soft fingers gliding over his skin. The soft smell of Jonathan was everywhere. On the sheets, in

the air, on his skin...

The room was quiet, the soft sounds of Joyce and Hopper talking in the living room combined with Jonathan's gentle breathing slowly lulling Steve to sleep. He moved his hand, slowly setting his palm over Jonathan's.

He felt those long fingers lace together with his and he fell asleep almost immediately after, his last thought circling around his head.

It was funny.

Steve didn't really remember when he started falling in love with Jonathan Byers.

But this moment definitely solidified his feelings.

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Notes for the Chapter:

That dimples thing was made up but fuck, wouldn't it be great if he did have them?

Don't let the sweetness fool you.

The next chapter is where the incident is revealed and let me tell you, if you trigger easy, you're going to want to read with caution.

Thanks so much for all the comments, you guys! I love reading them. The love you've shown this story has me weak.

I'm announcing on here that I'm going to be participating in "Stonathan Week 2017". If you don't know what it is, please search the tag on tumblr and you'll be filled right in. It's pretty much a week to write some Stonathan based off of a prompt for the day. As mentioned, it'll be week long event-From December 18th to December 24th. It is made possible by tumblr user: "strangerthanjonathan" and we

should all thank them for this gift!

I'm probably going to throw out lengthy one-shots for each prompt. Hope you guys tune in!

8. But You Were Still So Afraid

Young Frankenstein had always been a favorite at the Byers' household. They watched it every year, even owning it on video cassette. When Hopper had mentioned that he'd never even heard of it, Joyce had promptly popped it into the VCR.

They were just getting near the ending when Hopper suddenly spoke. His chest rose against her cheek as he asked, "Did Harrington ever come out?"

Joyce blinked, turning away from the screen. She shifted in Hopper's embrace, glancing down the hall. "I don't remember him leaving."

Hopper tilted his head, "Is he spending the night?" he removed his arms from around her as she got up.

"I'll be right back," she promised him, moving silently over to the room. She paused outside of her youngest son's door, peeking in and seeing him nestled comfortably in a flower-patterned sleeping bag on the floor. The sweet boy had let Eleven have his bed for the night and the girl was sleeping peacefully, hands tucked under her cheek. Joyce crept over, pulling the blankets over Eleven's body more securely and ducking down to brush the bangs away from Will's face before slipping out of the room.

Joyce smiled, slowly closing the door. Honestly, Hopper should just grab some things and start moving them in. She wondered what he thought about having a bunk-bed put in Will's room. She tip-toed over to Jonathan's room and knocked lightly, "Jonathan?"

When no answer came, she slowly grasped the door knob and turned it as quietly as she could. She stepped into the room silently and stared down at the pair of them on the bed. The grin on her face was so wide that it actually kind of hurt.

Jonathan's cheek rested on Steve's bare chest, his arm thrown across the older boy's front and fingers laced together loosely with one of Steve's hands. She bit her lower lip to smother her coo at the sight of Steve's own arm wrapped around Jonathan's shoulders, holding him

close as his their soft breathing filled the quiet air.

God, they made a gorgeous pairing.

She swiped her thumbs over her eyes, feeling them come away moist, and she smiled. She grabbed a spare blanket from her son's closet and carefully draped it over their lower halves, tucking them in as gently as she could to not wake them.

She returned to the living room, grinning as she noticed Hopper with his eyes glued to the screen. She plopped down at his side, and he turned away from the movie, smiling at her.

"So, is he sleeping over?"

"I'd say so," Joyce answered, staring at him, "They're completely wrapped around each other." She watched his reaction carefully and she felt a weight lift off of her shoulders as he smirked. "You're okay with that?"

"Of course," Jim shrugged, eyes glancing back to the television to see the credits beginning to roll, "Jonathan is a good kid, Steve too." He looked over at her, "Are they dating?"

"I don't know," Joyce confessed, "I was just teasing earlier but they do look awfully sweet together," she smiled, tapping her fingers against her knee. "Honestly, I'm just glad that Jonathan is letting himself get close to someone. He was very closed off a few years ago. There was a brief period of time where he was so," she struggled to find the words; "he was almost *empty*."

"What do you mean?" Hopper asked, and Joyce nibbled on her lower lip.

"He just changed. One moment he was my sweet boy, carefree and happy, and then almost as if it happened overnight, he became timid. Shy, scared, withdrawn," she sighed, "he didn't ever want to leave the house. I had so much trouble getting him to leave his room and go to school."

Hopper frowned, eyebrows drawn together, "It happened out of nowhere?"

Joyce nodded slowly, "Yes..." she narrowed her eyes, "well, I think it started after he came home from being out with his dad. Lonnie had taken him hunting," she shook her head, visibly bothered, "Jonathan loves animals and his Lonnie, the jerk, forced him to kill a rabbit." She sighed, "He came home completely devastated. Shut himself in his room, wouldn't eat, and didn't want to talk. He just cried for days."

Hopper nodded slowly. "And then?"

"Well, Lonnie started to take him out more. He seemed to want to build Jonathan to be a "man" and would take him to a lot of places. Then one day he brought Jonathan back and...he was different." Joyce shook her head, "he was so despondent. The only person he would smile for was Will and he had these nightmares," her voice began to break, "Jim, he would wake up *screaming* and he would fight me and Lonnie when we tried to calm him down."

"I got worried," she whispered, her eyes watering, "Lonnie was being his usual brass self and said that Jonathan was just acting out but he wasn't, Jim. He wasn't being bad. He was still helpful, still took care of his baby brother, still obeying the rules and doing his chores and homework but he was just blank. He was always tired because he barely slept."

"Jonathan, sweetie, you need to sleep." Joyce sighed as she stroked the silky blonde hair through her fingers, *"You're a growing boy, and you need your energy."*

"I'm scared," Jonathan whispered back, his head buried in her lap, "I don't want to have another one."

"Maybe they've gone," Joyce said softly, "Maybe you won't have one tonight and you can sleep really nicely. Do you want to try?" she felt his head shaking.

"I want to, mommy," he said and the way his voice broke nearly ruined Joyce, "but I'm just too scared."

"We took him to the doctor," Joyce murmured, her hands dragging down her face. "Told him about Jonathan's nightmares and Lonnie

explained that he figured Jonathan was watching too many horror movies and just couldn't sleep." She exhaled heavily, "They prescribed sleeping pills. It was the only way Jonathan could sleep a full eight hours uninterrupted."

"How long did he take them for?"

"About three weeks. They helped but I didn't like how they would drain him so much. He would get sleepy during class even. He still had about a weeks' worth of pills left but I stopped letting him take them. After having slept finally, he was more or less back to normal." Joyce shook her head. "But there was always something, you know? Lonnie and I divorced soon after and Jonathan refused to go anywhere with him when he would visit." She snorted, "I don't blame him. Lonnie would have probably strapped my little boy with a rifle to force him to hunt, take him to some sort of sporting even he had no interest in or God knows what else."

"But he was normal?" Hopper asked, his face impassive, "He was happy?"

"He was, just not whenever Lonnie would pop up." she shook her head, "Jonathan's never told me, but I'm sure that Lonnie must have hit him sometimes when they were out. My sweet boy...he never wanted to cause problems." She sniffed, bringing her hand up to wipe her cheeks, "I've asked Jonathan a couple of times but he never wants to talk about it. I just know that Lonnie must have hurt him...and I should have divorced the cruel bastard so much sooner but-"

"Hey," Hopper said gently, reaching out to hold her hand, "It's over. Despite what a scumbag Lonnie was, Jonathan is a great kid. You've done a really great job raising him and Will." He raised her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles gently and watching her smile at him.

"Thank you," she whispered, stroking her thumb over his chin. "When Lonnie drove himself into a damn ditch after drinking too much, I think that's when Jonathan was back to his regular self. It's still so surprising to see how taken he is with Steve, though. He's always kept to himself; I don't even think he's ever been that close to a boy."

Hopper chuckled, "Well, Harrington is a charming kid." He stood from the couch, stretching, and then he held out his hand, "Now, its bedtime, young lady."

Joyce smirked playfully, taking his hand and getting up, "You promised to let me stay up late." She turned to the television on their way out of the living room, switching it and the VCR off, "I don't want to go to bed."

"Don't worry, I'll tell you story."

Joyce stifled her laugh with her hand and they retreated into her bedroom.

--

He'd just finished cleaning the mirror when he caught a glimpse at his reflection on the glass's shiny surface. He brushed his fringe away from his face, staring at the bruise covering his eye with a frown. His mother had thrown a fit when she saw it at its worse, about four days ago. Had grabbed his chin and demanded a name but he had brushed her off, claiming that he ran into a door.

A terrible lie, but she seemed to understand that he didn't want to talk about it so she simply grabbed an ice-pack, pressed it to his eye, and baked him his favorite cookies. Will had seen it also, and he spent the afternoon drawing him a picture, which he kept pinned up in his bedroom.

Sighing, he picked up the cleaning supplies he had used to clean and then left the bathroom, heading towards the supply closet and dumping all the cleaning supplies inside before making his way to the break-room.

He slipped inside and glanced around. It was empty, but then again, he knew it would be. He had the closing shift and the theater had its last screening fifteen minutes ago. He moved over to the sink, washing his hands quickly. He had just started drying them when he heard the door open and he glanced behind his shoulder.

Two men had wandered in, the hood from their jackets pulled up to cover their faces. It was unusual, but it had been sometime since he'd been outside of the building. Maybe it was raining out?

"Are you guys new?" he asked, wiping his hands on his pants. They didn't answer and he tilted his head, "I'm sorry but if you're not staff then you can't be in here."

They said absolutely nothing and he was beginning to get nervous. The both of them were of similar height, easily taller than him, and even though they were wearing heavy jackets, they looked bulky and strong.

He heard footsteps near the door and he turned his head to watch it open. He felt his body shiver as familiar grey eyes met his. "Eric," he murmured, confused as the older man stepped inside and flicked the lock on the door.

He hadn't seen the older man since that night. He'd gone out of his way to avoid him, swapping shifts with another coworker even. Eric kept his stare on Jonathan as he leaned against the door, arms crossed and face dark, "What are-"

The strange men moved and Jonathan cried out as they grabbed his wrists hard, dragging him over to the lockers and shoving him against them. His head bounced against the metal and he whimpered, eyes shutting as pain danced around the back of his skull.

He felt something cold trace his lips and he stiffened, his eyes opening as realization crept in. He stared into Eric's angry face and his bottom lip trembled, "N-no, please don't." He stared at the beer bottle, his face paling as Eric waved it in front of him menacingly.

"This is how it went, yeah?" Eric whispered, and Jonathan bit down hard on his bottom lip as the men tightened their grips on his wrists. It hurt. "This is how they did it? Two of them holding you down? While your daddy shoved this inside of you?"

"Eric," he said, tears beginning to slide down his cheeks. "Please, please, let me go." God, this was bad. This was so bad. He struggled, gritting his teeth as Eric pressed the bottle neck hard against his stomach.

"This is how he opened you up, right? Before he let his two friends fuck you?" Eric continued, voice a low snarl, and Jonathan sobbed brokenly as he felt fingers slide into the waist-band of his pants. His abdominal muscles clenched as he felt the cold bottle press against his skin. "And you just let it happen."

"Bet he loved it," one of the strangers muttered and Jonathan flinched as the man moved closer, leaning his head down to lick a stripe up Jonathan's wet cheek before mouthing at his trembling jaw, "bet he moaned like a whore."

*"Please," he begged, his head lowering and his bangs shielding his eyes, "please don't do this to me." He was remembering again. He could feel them on him. Against him. Pressing **inside** of him.*

The pain. It was so painful. The tearing, the bleeding, his own screams echoing in his ears. He could remember the sounds. The fucking groaning, the combination of his whimpering cries and the sounds they fucking made around him like a sick soundtrack engraved in his mind.

"Holy shit, he's pissing himself."

He was. He could feel the stream sliding down his thighs but he couldn't bring himself to care. He heard their grunts of disgust.

"Fuck this, I'm not touching him now." The guy on the left said, stepping aside a bit. The other guy mumbled out an agreement, also hedging away a bit.

"Let him go," Eric ordered and Jonathan slid down, falling over. He could feel his urine soak against his pants and he tensed as hair was grabbed, his head jerked back so that he could look up into Eric's frowning face.

"You're fucking disgusting, Byers," he said softly, "I just wanted to remind you of that." He jerked his chin towards the door, "let's go," he told the two men and they obeyed, following their leader as he flicked the lock and opened the door.

They left him there, in a puddle of his own piss and tears.

What would they have done if he hadn't pissed himself? Jonathan doubled over, vomiting violently onto the already dirtied floor. They would have done it...

Eric would have let them rape him the same way his father had...had let them...

Jonathan woke with a strangled gasp, his hands reaching blindly in

front of him as he sat up wildly. He felt hands grab onto his shoulders and as his vision focused, he saw Steve's concerned gaze staring at him and he choked out a small cry, throwing his arms tightly around the older boy's neck.

"I've got you," Steve said, his own arms immediately wrapping around Jonathan's middle. He lifted him with no effort, pulling Jonathan onto his lap and holding him tight. There was nothing sexual in the touch or position, his arms simply wrapped tight around Jonathan's quivering body.

"I've got you," Steve repeated quietly as Jonathan hid his face against the bare skin of his neck. Tears gathered in his eyes but he blinked them away, exhaling hard. He felt Steve's hands gently slide up and down his back.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, shutting his eyes tight as Steve's hands stilled, "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Are you kidding me right now? Stop it," Steve whispered, turning so that he could press his lips against Jonathan's hair, "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Jonathan admitted. He pulled back a little bit, looking anywhere but Steve's eyes. He was very aware that he was sitting right on Steven's hips, his knees tucked up against the older boy's sides loosely.

"Talk to me," Steve requested gently, using his hands to brush away Jonathan's bangs before grabbing his cheeks, trying to meet his gaze, "Come on, beautiful," he begged softly, "don't look away from me."

"Not right now," Jonathan murmured, eyes pleading with the older boy to understand, "not...not right now." He watched Steve's shoulders drop as he sighed.

"Okay," Steve agreed easily, "okay." He brought his wrist up to look at his watch and he hummed in surprise, "Already nine." He smiled playfully, "your curtains really do keep out sunlight. I slept better than I ever have," he said, clearly trying to lighten the mood.

Despite the turmoil raging in his head, Jonathan found himself

smiling back, if only a bit. "Me too," he answered quietly. A gentle knock on his door had him jumping in surprise and he quickly extracted himself from Steve's embrace.

He opened his door a crack, peeking down at wide brown eyes. "Hi, El," he greeted softly, watching as she smiled up at him. Her curly hair was messy and there was a sleepy look on her face.

"Morning, Jonathan," she played with the hem of her lilac colored pajama shirt; "Dad and Joyce went out to get some stuff for a picnic later. Can I get started on breakfast?" breakfast being her daily Eggo's covered in whipped cream.

A picnic?

Jonathan smiled, "Sure, you know where the waffles are," he watched as she nodded happily, "is Will awake?"

"Not yet," her eyes sparkled with mischief, "do you want me to wake him up?"

He winked at her, "Go for it." He watched as she scurried off, back to Will's room to probably tickle his younger brother awake and he glanced behind his shoulder.

Steve was sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at him with a small smile on his lips. "Picnic, hm?" he stood, stretching. His fingers nearly grazed the ceiling, Jonathan noticed, before his eyes trailed down that slim and defined chest.

"I guess so," he answered, still staring at the exposed skin, "Want to come along?"

"Are you going?" Steve bent down and snagged his shirt and Jonathan nodded.

"Yeah, it sounds nice. I'm off tonight so maybe," he shrugged, "maybe you can stay here with me...again?"

"Is that even a question?" Steve teased as he pulled his shirt on, and the way his hair poofed out of the neckline after caused Jonathan to laugh a bit, hiding his lips behind his hand at the confused glance

Steve threw his way.

"I'll get started on breakfast," Jonathan said, already turning away.

"Hey."

Gentle hands grabbed onto his wrist and Jonathan turned at the light tugging, sliding into Steve's open arms. He rested his head on Steve's shoulder and he sighed softly at the feeling of those arms sliding around his torso.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

Jonathan considered the question. The memory-because it definitely wasn't a nightmare-was still fresh in his mind but feeling Steve's arms securely around him...that was something he'd never had before.

He was used to waking up in terror and being alone. He was used to crying himself out and then facing the day. He was used to feeling so tired and sad. So lonely. He wasn't used to Steve being there.

But he *wanted* to get used to it.

"I will be," Jonathan answered softly and he raised his head. He smiled at Steve, who readily smiled back, and then turned back to his door. "I promised I'd make you pancakes last night."

"And eggs!" Steve reminded, following him. The sound of Will's shrieking laughter and Eleven's giggles greeted them as they walked out the door and Jonathan smiled to himself, already forgetting the memory.

For now.

--

"Come on, buddy, just keep your eye on the ball," Steve instructed as he stood a few feet away from Will. He heard the sound of the camera whirring and he winked over at Jonathan. The blonde smiled at him from behind the lens.

The sun was nice and warm even though the air held a slight chill to

it. It was going to be a cold winter, maybe they would even get snow. Steve had pulled off his jacket anyway, his pale blue T-shirt slightly stuck to his chest, sweating only a bit as he played ball with Will. The younger male had the sleeves of his green sweater pulled to his elbows as he steadied the bat.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve could see Jonathan adjusting the camera's lens. Jonathan looked really good in sweaters. The one he was wearing today was a soft yellow color and Steve found it an incredibly attractive color on the other boy.

After breakfast, Steve had hopped into his car and driven home after promising Jonathan that he was just going to go grab some extra clothing and his baseball gear. He left a note just in case his parents returned, even though it was unlikely, grabbed his school bag, his gear, and some more pajama pants and his damn hair spray that he had been neglecting, and quickly locked up the house before driving back to the Byers' home.

By the time he'd gotten there, Joyce and Hopper had returned and Jonathan was helping his mom make sandwiches and fruit salad for the picnic. Hopper, Will and Eleven were in the living room playing Atari on the television and Steve had settled himself down on the couch to watch, laughing as Hopper argued at the screen as Eleven easily beat his score at Galaga.

"I see the ball," Will smarted as he kicked at the dirt forlornly, "I also see it sailing past my head since you throw so high." He swung the bag again, nearly stumbling from the weight, "this bat is heavy!"

"Excuses!" Steve shouted back, warming up his arm with a few circles, "All you have to do is swing!" he tossed the ball again, watching as Will slid his heel back and swung hard. The poor boy spun in a full circle and slipped on the grass, landing on his bottom.

Will groaned, "I'm not good at this!" he rolled the bat away from him, visibly upset and the sad look tugged at Steve's heartstrings.

"Okay, hang on," he glanced around.

Jonathan was too busy snapping pictures of everything. Hopper was

already snoring while laid out on the blanket, his mouth open wide. Joyce was spread out beside him, smoking idly and reading some romance novel.

Eleven!

The little girl, dressed in a white sweater over blue overalls, was walking around the lake while munching on some white grapes. He called out to her and he watched as she looked his way.

“Want to pitch?” he asked, waving his baseball glove at her.

“Really? Okay!” she immediately sealed up the bag of grapes and rushed to the blanket. She placed the bag near the wicker basket and jogged over to him.

He smiled at her and handed her the glove. It was way too big on her, but it would do. “Okay so just pitch it over to us when I tell you to, okay?” he held the ball out to her.

She nodded, grabbing the softball.

Steve jogged over to Will, reaching down to hook his hands underneath the boy’s armpits. He hefted him up easily and dusted him off, “Okay,” he started, correcting Will’s stance and standing behind him, “I’ll guide you-”

“Steve,” Jonathan said from somewhere ahead of them, “Look at me.”

Steve raised his head, remembering to smile along with Will as Jonathan raised the camera up to his face. He held his smile until Jonathan lowered the camera again and then grabbing Will’s hands as they wrapped around the bat, “Okay, focus.”

Will repeated his word, focusing on his task.

Steve gave a nod to Eleven, “Pitch!”

She swung her arm back and tossed the ball. It was a decent pitch, Steve noticed, and he manipulated Will’s hands to move, striking the ball. It bounced over to Eleven and she caught it as it skidded along the grass.

Jonathan snapped another picture, this time of Eleven as the little girl held up the ball with a wide grin on her face.

Steve moved away from Will, "Think you can hit it now?"

"Maybe," Will lifted the bat again, tightening his grip on it. Steve gently pulled Jonathan a few feet away, making sure he wouldn't get whacked by the bat, before turning to Eleven, "Go on!"

She tossed the ball again and Steve raised his arms above his head and cheered happily as Will swung, the bat cracking the ball hard enough to send it sailing over Eleven's head. "You did it, bud!"

"I did it!" Will dropped the bat, running over to Steve, who caught him in a tight hug. Jonathan snapped his final picture, this time of Steve and Will laughing together as they embraced.

After leaving Will with the bat so he could continue to play with Eleven, Steve led Jonathan over to the lake. They walked along the perimeter and Steve glanced over at Jonathan. "Hey," he murmured, waiting till Jonathan looked over at him, "Can I hold your hand?"

Jonathan chuckled, reaching out, and Steve took his offered hand. His skin was warm, even with the chill in the air. He smiled and pulled Jonathan in a bit closer, "How do you keep your skin so warm?"

"Will says that too," Jonathan said softly, lips quirked, "He's always a little bit cold so he likes to hold onto my hands."

"Well, I'm taking his spot," Steve drawled, glancing at the lake. He thought about this morning, about how he'd woken up to Jonathan's panicked gasping and how he'd looked on the verge of tears, "Jonathan...about earlier..."

Jonathan nodded, keeping his eyes on the grass.

"I'm sorry that you had a nightmare," Steve murmured.

"No, it," the blonde boy sighed, "it wasn't a nightmare. I was remembering something." The admission was quiet, and Jonathan looked so sad suddenly. "I will tell you, just..." he shrugged, his

fingers tightening around Steve's, "I just want to enjoy this. Being here, with you. For now."

"Okay," Steve said. And he lowered himself to the grass, tugging a bewildered Jonathan with him. He sprawled out onto his back, cushioning his head on Jonathan's lap. He smiled brightly up at the confused blonde. "Let's enjoy being together then."

--

Jonathan smiled, gently tracing Steve's facial features with light touches. He touched over the dark brows, stroking the pads of his fingers over the slope of Steve's jaw and then he gently moved his fingers back up to trace Steve's lips with his thumb.

"I can stop," he said softly, seeing Steve's eyes flutter. "I can stop touching you if you want."

"Byers," Steve huffed, eyes opening to stare up at him, "Didn't I tell you last night that I didn't *want* you to stop?" he stretched lightly and grunted as his muscles popped, "I can't believe we have to go back to school tomorrow. It sucks."

Jonathan sighed, "I haven't even started on my homework." He heard Steve's answering groan and he laughed, "We'll work on it tonight."

"I don't even want to think about that," Steve grumbled, throwing an arm over his eyes. The soft sounds of nature around them lulled them into silence. Jonathan stared at the lake as the birds around them chirped happily, the warm sun licking their skin.

They stayed that way for a moment before footsteps came from behind them and Jonathan turned to see Will.

"Mom's packing up," he said, the bat swung over his shoulder, "Are you going to ride with Steve?"

"Of course he is," Steve answered for him and Jonathan smiled at Will's eye-roll. Steve sat up, quickly getting onto his feet and offering a hand to Jonathan, pulling him up with no effort. "Come on, brat," he said to Will, grabbing the bat from his hold and leading Will towards the middle of the field.

Steve was good with Will. He was patient...so patient.

Jonathan followed along, nervously fiddling with the camera. He had to tell Steve. He couldn't keep dodging this subject any longer. He wasn't going to be able to hide it, not if he kept remembering. He didn't even want to hide it from Steve but what if...

He forced himself to smile as they came upon his mother and Hopper. He grabbed the basket from his mother's hand and then looked over as Eleven jumped up onto Hopper's back for a piggy-back ride before she challenged Will to a race. He stared, his heart feeling almost painfully full, as Steve declared war and immediately squatted down in front of Will.

The tall boy hooked his arms around Will's knees and stood up to his full height, and Jonathan and his mom laughed as they ran off, Steve using his long legs to his advantage as he left Hopper in the dust.

"He's such a great guy," Joyce said as she leaned her head on Jonathan's arm while they walked back to the cars at a slower pace. The blanket was tucked securely under her other arm, the wind ruffling their hair slightly.

Jonathan smiled, sliding his arm around her waist, "He is," he whispered, listening to Steve and Will's shouts of victory, "he's amazing."

"Is he your boyfriend?" and he blushed brightly.

"N-no. I don't...I don't know," he replied, lowering his eyes as she turned to stare up at him.

"You two seem awfully close," she pointed out and Jonathan raised his head, somehow finding himself staring into Steve's eyes as they came up to him and the others. Will was still gloating but Eleven was patting her dad on the back, proud of their effort anyway.

"We are," Jonathan said to her finally, lowering his arm from around her waist as Steve grabbed the basket and blanket, handing them to Eleven as she climbed into Hopper's Chevy beside Will. Hopper was already behind the wheel, and Jonathan stood back, watching as

Steve held open the car door for his mother.

Steve was a great guy. He was amazing.

“We’ll see you back at home, sweetie!” Joyce called out and Steve shut the door gently, tapping on the hood as Hopper beeped his horn and pulled off.

“Well, Byers, how about we-”

Jonathan took the shot.

He raised his hands, sliding his fingers into Steve’s thick hair and leaned up, pressing his lips gently against the older boy’s. He could feel himself trembling with fear, so afraid of rejection, to the point where he could feel his eyes watering behind his eyelids, but he didn’t want to pull away.

He felt an arm wrap around his shoulders, another moving to circle around his back...and they both tugged him *closer* and Jonathan could feel tears slide down his cheeks. He eased back just a little bit, his hands sliding down to close around Steve’s neck and the soft noises they mouths made as they released and pressed together again and again was so loud and so beautiful in his ears.

He felt a hand cupping his cheek and he finally pulled away to breath, his eyes slowly opening and meeting Steve’s wide smile. His own lips formed a watery grin and he felt Steve’s thumbs gently brush away the tear streaks.

“Finally, shit,” Steve whispered, pressing his forehead against Jonathan’s, “God, I’ve wanted to do that since you looked at me for the first time but I...I wanted to be sure.”

“Since I looked at you?” Jonathan repeated, a bit confused. He stared up into those brown eyes, seeing them stare down at him with such intense emotion.

“Since you looked into my eyes,” Steve murmured, “since you finally looked *at me*.” And his head tilted, lowering, as he kissed Jonathan again.

He had to tell him, Jonathan knew.

He would tell him and even if it killed him, even if he was scared to death, he was going to do it. Because even if Steve decided to never speak to him again, to never touch him, or hold him...at least *this*, this he got to experience at least once.

--

Notes for the Chapter:

Omfg, you guys.

I'm sorry. I'm so BAD at numbering my chapters. This is just the chapter where we get INSIGHT into what happened but the ACTUAL scene is in the next chapter-**without question**.

I'm not trying to purposefully make you wait, I promise. I'm just so sloppy half the time. It's been even worse now that I've started my Stonathan Week one-shots bc I never remember to organize my files! But it'll get done!

So, listen here...

The next chapter was really hard to write. It's going to be mostly told in flashbacks from Jonathan's point of view. It's going to have HEAVY non-con, sodomizing with a foreign object (which you all know by now), gaslighting, and implied suicidal thoughts. PLEASE take this as your final warning; the next chapter, besides a brief moment of sweetness from the boys-will be DARK.

Aye, but look! It took eight damn chapters but they finally kiss!

I know some of you are saying, "oh, it's a bit unrealistic" I know it is. Its fiction and I've never been good at filling in loopholes in anything I've ever written for. I'm terrible at it. But I do this for fun and

for people to read for fun. That's all. I'm not claiming that anything in this makes any sense, I'm sure a lot of it doesn't.

But I enjoy writing it. I hope all of you enjoy reading it. ^^

9. You Had Every Reason to be Afraid

Notes for the Chapter:

-Warning-

This chapter contains: Drugging, sodomy, rape, gaslighting and physical abuse of a child. If easily triggered, you may want to skip the second half of this chapter. Jonathan's memories start with a BOLD letter and will end with a BOLD letter as I figured italicizing everything might be harsh on the eyes. I will mark with an italicized word for when the abuse begins and when it ends each time.

This is kind of all over the place but it's what made sense in my head, honestly.

--

They'd been working on their homework for less than an hour.

After the picnic, they'd gone back to Jonathan's house where Will and Eleven demanded Steve play Atari with them. Steve snatched a controller, his game face on, and Jonathan had sat beside them all on the couch, dozing off now and then.

The day went by too quickly, and after Steve had cried foul after Will poked him in the ribs, which resulted in him jerking his controller and his spacecraft being exploded by the alien enemies, Jonathan had gotten up and pulled Steve up, handing the controller to Eleven.

"We're going to do our homework," Jonathan said to his mom, who was on the phone. She waved a hand at him, smiling, and returned to her phone call. Hopper had left after dropping off Joyce and the kids, needing to go down to station to check in with Callahan and Powell.

Jonathan picked up a Joy Division tape, popping it into the music player and setting the volume low. He grabbed his satchel, pulling out his math book, a pencil and his notebook. Steve grumbled, grabbing his own school bag and turning it inside out, dumping his books on Jonathan's bed and grabbing a random one to flip open.

Steve was leaning against Jonathan's bed, the Spanish textbook open on his lap. Jonathan was right beside him, his knee drawn up and balancing his notebook as he filled in answers to a math sheet in his notebook. He murmured something to himself and narrowed his eyes at a certain equation, before staring up at the ceiling as he calculated in his head.

"You're distracting me."

Jonathan smirked, turning his eyes back to his notebook. He scribbled an answer, tapping the end of his pencil against his lips. "I'm not even looking at you, Steve." He glanced over at the older boy, seeing him blatantly staring at him and he chuckled, turning back to his pre-calculus and grabbing his ruler.

"Jonathan," Steve knocked his own book aside, fed up with pretending to read, "You don't honestly expect me to be able to concentrate on how to translate *"I need to use the bathroom"* in Spanish when only hours ago you and I were kissing." He sighed dramatically, "It's impossible."

"What do you want me to do about that?" Jonathan asked, a bit distracted as he stared at the math problem. He despised math. It wasn't that he wasn't good at it, he was fairly decent, but all the angles and theorems and sin/cos identities were so annoying.

He blinked as the notebook was tugged away from his knee and he raised his head, staring up at Steve as the older boy leveled him with an innocent smile. "What-mmph," he closed his eyes, his fingers releasing his ruler and reaching up to touch lightly at Steve's smooth jaw as their lips met.

He felt Steve's mouth open and he parted his lips in a quiet moan as a warm tongue gently brushed against his the seam of his lips. He felt a hand grab a hold of his hip and he turned his body sideways, falling

into Steve's embrace as the older boy pulled him closer.

Their tongues dueled slowly, sensually, the taste of the fruit salad they'd had at the picnic still lingering as they made out.

Made out.

He was making out with Steve Harrington. He giggled, turning his head away as he brought a hand up to his lips.

"Am I that bad of a kisser?" Steve was smiling as he asked, his eyes soft as he gazed at him and Jonathan shook his head, a smile stretching across his own lips. He reached out, gently touching the little moles on the side of Steve's neck.

"You're a wonderful kisser," Jonathan said, his sliding his fingers into the back of Steve's head. He stroked the thick hair slowly, watching Steve's eyes close in pleasure, "Steve, we really need to get this homework done."

"Later," Steve mumbled, his head falling onto Jonathan's shoulder, "Keep playing with my hair." He wrapped his arms around Jonathan's midsection, nuzzling against his neck, pressing a lazy kiss against the pale skin.

"You're such a brat," Jonathan mused, his fingers continuing their stroking, "Do you have any plans for college? This is your final year, isn't it?"

"Mm," Steve replied, "I have to write some essay and send it off." He sighed and Jonathan shivered, feeling the hot breath against his neck, "I don't know. I kind of figured I would just start working for my dad's company. It's what he always wanted."

"What do you want?" Jonathan asked, tenderly tracing the shell of Steve's ear. He blinked as Steve raised his head, staring into soft brown eyes. He felt Steve's hand reach out for his and he linked their fingers together.

"Right now?" Steve said quietly, "I want to kiss you until your beautiful lips are swollen." He leaned in again, sealing his mouth over Jonathan's. They kissed slowly, their mouths softening as they

parted and started over and over.

"I thought you told mom you were doing homework."

Jonathan jumped, pulling himself away from Steve. He stared over at his door, where Will and Eleven were staring at them with almost identical grins. "Guys," he sighed, "what have I told you? You're welcome in my room anytime but you've got to knock."

"We're sorry," Eleven said sincerely, her arms full of papers, "we were hoping you could help us. The science fair is coming up and I still haven't picked a project, there are just too many choices." She was clearly overwhelmed.

Steve groaned, covering his eyes with his forearm, "I hated those science fairs when I was in junior high. I paid a brainy kid off to do mine, why don't you just do that?" he grunted when Jonathan elbowed him in the ribs. "I was just kidding, babe."

Babe.

Jonathan could feel his cheeks heating up, as they often did concerning matters with Steve. He shot his snickering younger brother a pointed look and then patted the floor in front of him. "Okay, let's see," he motioned them over, "Will, have you picked something?"

"I wanted to do a volcano," Will replied, "but Dustin snatched the idea." He spread out his papers, pointing to a list of topics, "Then I thought about doing this one," he tapped the fourth title on the list, "It's about how plants respond to music and we can get the supplies easily and you can take the pictures for me."

"Those poor plants are going to be put through the torture that is *Talking Heads*, *The Clash* and *David Bowie*," Steve shook his head somberly, shooting a wink at a giggling Eleven as the Byers brothers glared at him.

"I'll have you know-" Jonathan started but was interrupted by Steve grabbing his collar and pulling him into a chaste kiss. He gave Steve a dry look when the older boy pulled away with a laugh.

“What about you, princess?” Steve asked Eleven, who beamed at the nickname, “What have you got in mind?” he watched as she pointed a finger to the list.

“I like this one,” she said, tapping the title, “it’s about how much sugar is in food.”

“Who cares?” Steve muttered, grinning at her, “It tastes good.” He smiled playfully at Jonathan’s narrowed eyes, “Again, I’m only joking. It’s a good topic, El. Pretty easy to get done, I think.” He stood up, stretching, “Well, I guess I’d better go to the store and get some of those supplies.” He made to move and yelped when Jonathan snagged his jean pocket, tugging him right back down to sit.

“Nice try,” Jonathan said, grabbing the Spanish book and tossing it back on Steve’s lap, “Homework first and then we’ll take them to the store to pick out supplies.” He looked to the kids, “Start with the written work. Introduction, variables, and things like that.”

Steve pouted, watching the kids gather up the papers and leave the room, closing the door behind them, “We could just go right back to making out?” he suggested hopefully, leaning closer to Jonathan’s face and puckering his lips. He sighed as a notebook was pressed against his cheek, “Alright, alright.” He opened his book again, flipping to the correct page, “You owe me about an hour of solid kissing before bed tonight, babe.”

Jonathan hid his smile behind his ruler, writing something down in his notebook. He never knew how much he would *like* the endearment. It sounded especially nice coming from Steve’s lips.

--

“I’m moving in,” Steve exclaimed as he took a bite of the spaghetti Jonathan and his mother had prepared. He smiled charmingly at Joyce, “I’ll fax you the adoption papers.” He slurped with purpose and Joyce laughed.

“It was mostly Jonathan,” she admitted as she licked her lips, “He makes the sauce himself. I still don’t really know what he puts in it to make it so savory.”

“Whatever I find in the spice cabinet,” Jonathan replied, grabbing his glass and taking a sip of water. He flashed him a small smile and Steve readily smiled back. They finished dinner, talking about the upcoming science fair with the kids.

“Daddy,” Eleven said, grabbing her glass of juice, “Will you help us with our projects?”

Hopper hummed, his mouth full. He chewed and took a sip of his own juice glass, “Of course, sweetheart,” he picked up his fork again, “Did you get supplies?”

“Uh huh.” She nodded, “Steve took us to pick them up.”

Steve held up hand as Hopper nodded at him in gratitude, his own cheeks stuffed full of meatballs.

“I need some help decorating my board.” Eleven said and then she smiled even wider when Hopper nodded at her again.

“Our dad never helped with projects,” Will suddenly said, his smile slightly sad, “and mom would be working so it was usually just Jonathan staying up all night with me to work on them.”

Jonathan fork clattered onto his plate and Steve glanced at him, watching the small blonde mutter an apology and pick up his fork again, his eyes staring pointedly at his plate. Steve licked his lips, looking over at Will.

“No worries, baby Byers. You’ve got both of us to do your work for you now,” he smirked playfully and reached out, ruffling Will’s dark brown hair. The smaller Byers smiled at him, knocking his hand away lightly.

They finished dinner and Steve walked behind Jonathan as he washed dishes, wrapping his arms loosely around the smaller male’s midsection and looking over his shoulder, “Are you okay?” he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss on Jonathan’s cheek as he watched the way Jonathan vigorously scrubbed at the plates.

“Yeah,” Jonathan answered shortly. He handed Steve a towel, “Want to help?” and Steve took the towel, drying off the dishes as Jonathan

handed them to him. He bumped his hip against the younger boy's side, smiling playfully.

"Want to take a walk with me after we're done here?"

"A walk?" Jonathan repeated, his lips quirking, "In the woods?" he handed Steve another plate and Steve took it.

"Yeah," Steve shrugged, "it'll be romantic. Or something." He smiled as Jonathan laughed.

"Or something," Jonathan agreed, handing Steve the last dish. He left the water on, washing his hands and then grabbing a different towel, drying his hands off. "Sure," he said, eyes soft, "We shouldn't be out too late, though. We have school tomorrow," he sighed as he turned the faucet off.

"Alright," Steve nodded. He held out his hand, linking his fingers with Jonathan's as soon as the younger boy took a hold of it. They made their way out of the kitchen, strolling past the living room where Joyce, Hopper and the kids were watching some show on the television, and wandered outside.

"You ever got lost out here?" Steve asked, looking around at the trees. The sun was beginning to set, casting a soft orange halo around the area. He felt Jonathan's fingers twitch against his hand and he glanced down at the younger boy.

"Not in these woods, no," Jonathan murmured, "I feel very comfortable here. I like to take pictures of the wildlife out here."

"Yeah? Are there any mountain lions I should be concerned about?" he asked playfully and Jonathan smiled.

"It's mostly squirrels and birds," Jonathan nibbled on his lower lip, "and a...few rabbits." He was getting that sad look in his eye and Steve paused.

He leaned his back against the trunk of a tree, pulling Jonathan into a loose embrace. He moved his arms down the blonde's back, and gently grasped the slender hips. He peered down at Jonathan's brown eyes, "Are you okay?"

Jonathan didn't respond at first. He leaned into Steve, his own hands coming up to rest on Steve's shoulders. It took him a few seconds and Steve kept their gazes locked, listening to the whistles and sounds of nature around them.

"I have a lot to tell you," Jonathan murmured. "I...I know that I'm hard to understand. It's just that," he inhaled quietly, his forehead coming down to nudge against Steve's neck and Steve turned his head, kissing the soft blonde hair, "I'm really scared of what your reaction will be."

Steve frowned, "Is this the same thing you told that asshole?" he questioned softly and he knew he was right when Jonathan tensed in his arms. "Jonathan, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I'm perfectly content with-

"No," Jonathan interrupted, fingers gently stroking the back of Steve's hair, "I..." he swallowed hard, "I have feelings for you, Steve."

And Steve's heart jumped. Right, so, it wasn't a confession of love but there was *something* there. Jonathan liked him.

"I have feelings for you and it isn't fair of me to keep this from you because...because I think you have feelings for me too." He raised his head, staring up, "D-don't you?" and his lips quirked as Steve nodded excitedly.

"I do," Steve said immediately, his hands coming up to cradle Jonathan's cheeks, "I do, babe." He smiled goofily, "I mean, I thought it was kind of obvious on my part. The touching, the flirting," he blinked, "Man, maybe I suck at it," and he delighted in Jonathan's small laugh.

"You do not," Jonathan assured, "I just didn't know if I wanted to risk letting it happen. Letting myself feel for you when I know I'm such a burden and that you deserve so much better."

Wait a damn minute.

"You're not a burden," Steve said, smile dropping, "Jonathan, I don't

know what happened to you and I'm going to guess that it was something really bad, but you're not a burden. Not to me. Not to anyone." He pulled Jonathan closer, breathing gently against his parted lips, "I know saying it now might not mean much but I'll prove it to you." He ducked his head down, capturing those soft lips in a kiss.

He'd make sure Jonathan knew.

--

Jonathan had already brushed his teeth, changed into a pair of dark blue jeans and comfy wine colored sweater and gotten Will up before Steve was even conscious. He smiled as he opened the door to his room, seeing Steve still sleeping on the bed.

He was shirtless, as usual, with his face buried in a pillow and his mouth opened as he snored quietly. He was sprawled out, his right arm still draped over Jonathan's side of the bed and his legs bent towards the wall.

Jonathan bent over, stroking Steve's messy hair, "Wake up, would you? I'm going to get started on breakfast." He heard the quiet groan and then yelped as arms wrapped around his body and tugged him down.

"Steve," Jonathan rolled his eyes, feeling Steve's dark head cuddle up to his neck. He slid his hands up and down Steve's back gently and then patted his side, "Come on, we've got to-" he trailed off, his sentence ending in a gasp as he felt a warm lips kiss at his neck.

Something hard was pressing against his belly button and Jonathan flushed, a weak little squeak escaping his lips as Steve bared down on him, hard cock sliding against his body. "S-steve," he murmured, feeling his own cock twitch as Steve's fingers slid down his body to grab onto the loops of his jeans.

Jonathan closed his eyes, arching his back as Steve continued his slow grinding and he moaned into the air as Steve's fingers slid underneath his sweater to stroke at his flat belly. Fuck, it felt amazing. Steve's fingers were cool as they brushed against his heated

skin and Jonathan gripped onto the older boy's shoulders, pulling him down harder.

Steve grunted lowly from above him and damn it that wasn't the sexiest sound he'd ever heard. He felt Steve's cock through the thin material of his pajama bottom stroke against the bare skin of his stomach and he licked his lips, slowly sliding his own hand down. He slid his palm over the waist band of the green pajama pants, his fingers gliding over smooth, hard flesh.

"Fuck Jonathan," Steve whispered, his mouth opening against Jonathan's neck. He bit down as Jonathan wrapped his hand around Steve's straining cock, their moans echoing around the room and Jonathan lifted his own hips as Steve's hand slowly worked to unzip and unbutton his jeans.

He felt fingers slide down his skin and he bit his bottom lip, eager to feel more of-

"Jonathan! Is breakfast ready yet?"

They jumped at the same time and Steve nearly flew away from the smaller boy. He kept his back to Jonathan, the muscles in his back tense as he walked over to the window, running his hands over his hair.

Jonathan clambered off of the bed, rushing to the door just as Will was approaching. He kept his front behind the door as he smiled weakly at his younger brother, "Sorry, I was just trying to find my other shoe. I'll get started on it right now, go get your backpack and set it at the door."

"Okay," Will nodded, turning right back around and leaving.

Jonathan exhaled, slowly sliding the door closed. He turned, his back pressing against the wood, and he stared over at Steve. He bit his bottom lip, smothering his laugh as Steve stared back at him forlornly, "I'm sorry," he said sincerely, eyes wandering down and seeing the hard outline of Steve's erection. He swallowed hard and glanced back into Steve's dark eyes.

"Babe," Steve murmured, voice husky. They stared at one another, their bodies coiled tight with desire. Jonathan found himself wishing that they didn't have to go to class as his eyes slowly drifted down again. The tent in those pajama pants was quite big...

"G-go get ready," Jonathan whispered, looking back up to catch Steve's pout. "I still have to get breakfast done and we need to drop Will off."

"You seriously expect me to-" Steve trailed off, seeing Jonathan's eyes narrow. He snorted, shuffling his way to the door, "I fucking hate school," he grumbled as he gently moved Jonathan aside and slipped out the door. Jonathan smiled to himself, staring at his unmade bed.

A sudden realization came to him then and he stared at the bed thoughtfully.

He hadn't gotten scared. He hadn't felt...afraid of being intimate with Steve. There was no flinching, no memories attacking his mind, no hesitation and no fear...nothing like whenever Eric had tried to take things further.

Jonathan raised hand, sliding fingertips over to the spot where Steve had bit down on his neck. He could still feel it tingling and he let his hand fall down to his side. The realization came again and he bit his bottom lip.

"Can you make French toast instead of pancakes?!" he heard Will ask from outside and Jonathan couldn't help but laugh at Steve's shout that followed.

"No way! He's making those pancakes!"

--

"So what have you been up to, darling?"

Steve stopped glaring at his cereal and looked up at his mother. She was seated beside him at the table, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee and eyes gazing at the magazine in front of her. His father had already gone off to work before Steve even woke up.

It was Tuesday when they'd finally come home and the only reason why Steve knew that was because he had come to the house to pick up more clothing to take over to Jonathan's when he had spotted the car in the driveway that afternoon.

He'd quickly phoned Jonathan, letting him know that he wouldn't be able to spend the night anymore, and then went into the backyard to see his parents lounging in the pool. He'd waved at them, answered their questions about how school went, and then promptly locked himself in his room.

It was Wednesday morning now and Steve was actually *begging* for time to go by faster so that he could leave the house and get to school. All he wanted to do was go see Jonathan. He'd gotten so used to being around the beautiful blonde.

"Nothing," Steve shrugged, "Just school and practice." He glumly spooned the cereal into his mouth. "How is," shit, what was her name? "Who had the baby again?"

"Your cousin Audrey," his mother said, flipping a page in the magazine, "She had a beautiful baby girl." She peered up at Steve, "Don't you think it's about time you start looking for a good girlfriend, Steve? I want grandchildren someday."

"I'm eighteen," Steve muttered, his fingers gripping his spoon tightly, "I'm not even thinking about that right now." He really did not want to have this conversation. He scooped up some more cereal, chewing hard.

"Well, you should still find a nice girl," his mother huffed, "you're such an attractive boy, I don't think you'll have any trouble with-"

He stood, grabbing his half-empty bowl, "You know what? I just remembered, Nancy wanted me to give her a ride today, I've got to rush." The lie slipped out easily and he placed his bowl in the sink and then walked over, pecking his mom on the cheek. "Bye, mom."

"Well, what about her? Nancy is pretty and the two of you would make a gorgeous baby-"

"Goodbye, mom," Steve said through gritted teeth as he grabbed his jacket and schoolbag, rushing out of the house.

He'd never been happier to pull into the school's parking lot. He scanned around and found the old Ford, parking right beside it neatly. He climbed out of his seat, pulling his backpack over his shoulder.

Steve walked into the school, completely ignoring the stares and whispers. Billy hadn't been in school for the last two days so he was certain there were already rumors floating around but he didn't bother to listen. He made his way to the dark room, knowing he would find his boy waiting inside, opening the door quietly.

And he was right.

Jonathan was bent over, his fingers gently positioning the new prints to develop. The red glow of the room made his hair look darker than it was and Steve grinned as he ducked inside, creeping up behind the small boy.

"Hey," he whispered, his arms looping around Jonathan's midsection. He heard the stunned inhale of air and he chuckled, kissing Jonathan's temple, "Calm down, it's just me."

"Who else would it be?" Jonathan scoffed, "you scared me." He kept his gaze on the prints and Steve peered at them. The photos from the picnic. They turned out nicely, but then again, everything Jonathan shot came out nicely. He really liked the one of him and Will hugging.

"I want copies," he stated, squeezing Jonathan's sides.

The school day and the rest of the week went by slowly and every minute Steve had to spend at home was miserable. He couldn't even sneak off to see Jonathan as the other would either be working most nights.

He was so glad when the weekend came. His parents had been invited to a party Saturday night and he knew they would be getting in late. Jonathan had already agreed to pick him up early Saturday

and drop him off Sunday morning. All he had to do was sneak into the house to not wake his parents.

“Are you okay?” he asked the blonde. Jonathan had picked him up a few minutes ago and he had kept his eyes on the road the whole time, not even reacting when Steve had lowered the volume as a *Talking Heads* song began to play.

Jonathan nodded, his lips still drawn in a small frown. He wasn’t okay, Steve knew. Had something happened? “Babe,” Steve reached out, grasping one of Jonathan’s hands. He was relieved when those fingers locked with his own. “Are you-”

“I’m going to tell you.” Jonathan said simply, his voice small, “You... you need to know.” He didn’t say anything else and Steve knew better than to push. They rode in silence before Steve turned the volume back up, listening to the band he didn’t really care for.

There was no one home when they got to the Byers’ house. “Hopper took them out,” Jonathan explained, “To the arcade and then for pizza.” And they lay on Jonathan’s bed. Steve had his arms folded beneath his head, Jonathan’s head resting on his chest.

A few moments of silence went by and then Jonathan sat up. He brought his knees up, resting his elbows on them as he dragged his hands down his face. Steve sat up as well, waiting patiently while rubbing the smaller man’s back.

Finally, Jonathan sighed softly, “You’re going to want to interrupt,” he said softly, “but please don’t. I want to get it all off of my chest. I don’t want it take up any more space in my heart.” He gripped Steve’s hand, “Just...just let me finish.”

Steve swallowed and nodded, “Okay,” he murmured. He watched Jonathan’s eyes close as he began to speak.

“I was ten,” Jonathan started, his voice quiet, “when my dad decided to take me hunting...”

--

Jonathan shuddered hard, watching his father close the trunk of the

car before he turned to stare out at the woods. It was so cold out. Fresh snow covered the ground like a fluffy white blanket, the trees looking pale and sad, with mounds of snow covering their branches and their frozen roots.

His tattered winter jacket wasn't doing much to protect him from the cold, nor was the simple brown shirt underneath, but Lonnie had told his mother that they were simply going to take a trip into town. She would throw a fit if she knew Lonnie had him out here as ill-dressed as he was.

What were they even doing out here? Why had his father parked the car and ordered him out?

"D-dad," he spoke, teeth chattering and body shaking, as Lonnie walked up to him, keeping his arms behind his back as if he was hiding something, "I-I'm so cold...can I please wait in the car?" Jonathan winced as the rifle was pressed hard into his stomach and he quickly grabbed the weapon as it began to fall. He stared at his father in confusion.

Lonnie smiled but it didn't quite look natural, "Surprise! That's a real rifle with real bullets in it. You're going to learn to hunt today, son." He sounded proud of himself as he grabbed Jonathan's shoulder, pushing the protesting child deeper in the woods. They left the car parked on the road and the further they went into the woods, the colder it seemed to get.

They walked into the woods, and Jonathan could feel the snow slipping into his old Chuck Taylors. Lonnie stopped just behind a wide tree. He crouched down low, pulling Jonathan down hard.

They sat silently for what seemed like forever. The wind began to pick up, biting at his bare cheeks and nose. There was no other sound and the small boy was grateful. Maybe there would be no animals and they could go back to the car.

Jonathan shook violently, his entire body feeling hurt with how cold it was, "D-dad," he mumbled, "I don't want to do this." His hands were gripping onto the rifle but he was making sure not to aim it anywhere but the ground, "C-can we go home?"

"Hush," Lonnie scolded, "Do you want to scare everything away? You need to keep quite if you're going to hunt."

"I don't *want* to-"

"Shh! There," Lonnie hissed, grabbing the back of Jonathan's neck hard. His thumb dug deep into the skin and Jonathan winced in pain. "There! Do you see it?" and Jonathan forced his eyes to search the white expanse.

Oh no.

"Dad," Jonathan whispered, voice cracking, "Please don't make me kill that little rabbit." He heard Lonnie sigh in frustration and he jerked when he felt hands clamp around his wrists, manipulating his hands into lifting the rifle up and aiming, "Dad, please, no!" he felt callused fingers force his own finger to the trigger, "*No!*"

The gunshot was so loud. The blowback from the fire caused him to fall back against his father's knees and he gasped, his ears ringing. He sat up and looked into the white. There was a small spot of color...of red...

The tears began before he even started to run and he threw himself at the rabbit's side. The poor animal was spasming, an odd squeaking sound was coming from its bleeding mouth, and its back legs were kicking in the air, trying to run away and Jonathan pressed his hands to his mouth, watching as its movements finally stopped and it stared up at him with unseeing brown eyes.

Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. **Oh no.**

He reached out with a shaking hand, tears streaking down his face, and he touched its cold little nose, "I'm sorry," he sobbed, "I'm so sorry!" he felt a hand land harshly on his shoulder and he stared up into his dad's disappointed scowl.

"Stop it, be a man."

"It's dead," Jonathan whimpered, his tears freezing on his cheeks. Lonnie scoffed, gripping Jonathan's arm and tugging him up roughly.

“Stop behaving like such a little faggot, Jonathan. I didn’t raise you to be this way.” Jonathan cringed as his father rag-dolled him around, gripping the sleeve of his jacket and tugging him harshly out of the woods and back to the car.

Lonnie ranted the whole ride home. Saying mean and hurtful things and Jonathan could do nothing more than cry, his head bowed and his thoughts clouded with white fur marred in red blood.

When they made it to the house, Jonathan threw open the car door and ran, his body slamming into the front door. He knocked rapidly, bypassing his bewildered mother when she opened the door, and running directly for his room.

“Jonathan!” his mother’s worried cries followed after him but he shut his door, throwing his body against it and bringing his knees up to his chest, sobbing so hard that he could swear bile would come up any second.

He cried for a long time. At some point, exhaustion must have set in because he awoke to fingers stroking his hair as he lay on his bed. He twisted slowly, staring up into his mother’s concerned gaze.

“Your dad told me what happened,” she whispered, stroking his cheek, “My sweet boy. I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t want to do that ever again,” Jonathan whimpered, crawling into her lap as she wrapped her arms around him, “I don’t want to hunt, mommy. Please...please tell him that.”

“I have, my darling. I have.” Her fingers stroked up and down his back soothingly. “Are you hungry? Do you want to eat?”

“No,” Jonathan shook his head and moved away from her. He buried himself under his covers, “I want to stay here.”

“For how long, sweetie?”

He thought about it. Thought about that rabbit and how it would never again be able to hop around in the woods.

“Forever.”

--

It took a week and a good few days, but Jonathan finally felt comfortable enough to step out of his comfort zone. He'd still have to go to school, but anytime he was home he would stay in his room and cry.

He started to miss his mother and baby brother, though. Eventually he had come home from school one Wednesday afternoon and instead of rushing into his room, he sat on the kitchen table with Will, watching him color and listening to their mother make dinner.

Jonathan had just handed Will a red crayon when his father walked into the kitchen. He frowned, looking away from the man's small grin. He felt a hand on his hair and sniffed when his father began to speak.

"I'm sorry," Lonnie said quietly, "I shouldn't have made you do that." He pulled out a chair, reaching over to ruffled Will's hair, before looking back to Jonathan, "We'll do something else this weekend. Something that you like. I won't take you hunting again, okay?"

Jonathan stared at him. "Promise?" he whispered meekly, feeling his dad's heavy hand settle on the top of his head again.

"Sure, son." Lonnie replied, lifting his head and addressing Joyce, "grab me a beer, will you?"

Thursday came and went and Jonathan was actually sort of excited to go out with his father. Lonnie had talked about going to watch a movie and he wondered which one his father had picked out.

When Friday came, and Jonathan was buckled in the front seat, he blinked as he stared out the window. They had just passed the theater...

"Dad?"

"We'll turn around, I have something to do first." Lonnie said and Jonathan nodded. They rode in silence, driving for quite a while, and when they finally made it to their destination, Jonathan stared up at the building, confused. He hadn't ever seen it before.

“What are we doing here?” he asked, turning as his dad stepped out of the car. He followed, opening his own door and stepping out. He felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked up at his dad.

“Son, this is going to be a very important day for you.” He led Jonathan into the building. It was dark inside and there was weird music playing, and flashing lights. Jonathan glanced around, seeing women clad in revealing clothing and he cringed, turning away.

There was a platform in the middle of the place, with women dancing and slowly removing articles of clothing. When one of the women removed her bra, her bare breasts gleaming in the lights, Jonathan turned to his dad.

“C-can we leave, dad? I don’t like it here.” Jonathan tugged at his father’s shirt.

“Why don’t you like it, Jonathan? Aren’t the girls pretty?” Lonnie grabbed Johnathan’s jaw, forcing him to watch the woman as she danced in circles, her fingers sliding into the small shorts that covered her hips and Jonathan pulled his chin away.

“N-no, I don’t think so,” Jonathan replied, hiding his face in Lonnie’s shirt, “Can we please go see the movie now?”

“Fine,” Lonnie said and the way he’d bit out the word scared him. Jonathan felt his shoulder being grabbed again and then they were walking out of the building and back to the car. He sighed softly, thankful to be out of the loud area.

“Do you find women attractive, son?” Lonnie asked as he drove back the way they came. Jonathan frowned at the question.

“N-no,” he said quietly. “I think mommy’s pretty but I-I don’t care about...” he didn’t elaborate and he said nothing more as they continued the drive. He noticed that they passed the theater again but he didn’t say a word, feeling more and more nervous as the drive went on.

Lonnie drove them back to the woods.

Jonathan swallowed, opening the car door as his father ordered him

out. He walked with his head down to his father's side. To his relief, his dad didn't grab the rifle from the trunk of the car and he followed after his dad, confused.

"Do you think *boys* are attractive, Jonathan?"

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders as they walked. He did think some boys were very nice to look at. He remembered back when he watched *Halloween* in October. He found one of the male characters very attractive...

"Sometimes," he told his father, and the way Lonnie's jaw clenched as he looked back at him caused Jonathan to shrink back but he wasn't fast enough.

The hard punch to his temple floored him.

Jonathan blinked up at the clear sky, dazed. His jaw slipped open, breathless pants escaping him. There was a whirring in his ears, pressure in his skull, and finally the pain set in. Blinding pain that made his eyes water instantly and caused tears to streak down his cheeks. The ground was cold beneath him, the powdered snow chilly against his back.

He felt another blow to his ribs and he curled over in pain, gasping and shutting his eyes tightly. He felt hands underneath his armpits, lifting him up. He stood on trembling legs, his arms wrapped around his *ribs*.

"Hold your damn chin up," Lonnie said tightly and Jonathan struggled to right himself, muffling his sobs with his sleeve as he raised his head to look at his father.

"I didn't raise a faggot, you hear me?" Lonnie said angrily, pointing his finger in Jonathan's face and Jonathan flinched, nodding his head as quick as he could. His father sneered at him and pointed in the direction of the car, "Let's go watch the damn movie."

"M-my side," Jonathan hiccupped, "I-It hurts. Can we just go home?" he shivered at the dark look in Lonnie's eyes but was relieved when the man merely huffed and nodded. His side was aching so much. It

literally hurt to breath and his vision was still kind of dodgy from the blow to his head.

“Fine. Not a word to your mother about what happened or you’ll get it worse.” Worse? What was worse than this? But he nodded anyway, following after his father with his head down and sniffing quietly.

The ride home was terrifying. Lonnie hadn’t spoken a word and Jonathan struggled to keep his whimpering at bay. His ribs still ached terribly and he was afraid of how he might flinch if his mother hugged him too tightly.

As soon as they got home, he tried to duck into his room and not be seen but she had been waiting for them in the living room. Will was asleep on the couch, the television turned on but with very low volume.

She turned her head to greet them and paused at his tear-strained face. She jumped up from the couch and Jonathan bit his bottom lip hard to keep from flinching as she rushed to him but luckily she didn’t hug him immediately. She bent down, grabbing his shoulders.

“Jonathan,” she said urgently, “what happened? Why are you crying?” He couldn’t bring himself to talk, fear coiling in the pit of his stomach. “Baby, what happened?” she kneeled down in front of him, staring at him with so much concern.

He merely stared at her, not trusting himself to open his mouth and not vomit. He heard footsteps come up behind him and he looked down, hearing Lonnie begin to speak.

“Took him out hunting again and he killed another rabbit. He’s just being a big baby.” The hand that plopped down on his head made him flinch, remembering the way this man had hit him so hard before.

“Damn it, Lonnie, you promised you wouldn’t do that anymore!” she knocked Lonnie’s hand away and gripped Jonathan’s chin. He watched the way her eyes went to the bruise at the side of his head, “What happened to him here?”

"Recoil from the gun knocked him," Lonnie said, and Jonathan nodded his head, slipping away from his mother's embrace.

"Can I go to bed, please?" he asked quietly.

"You're not going to eat?" his mother asked, frowning, "I can make you something." She finally wrapped her arms around him and Jonathan sighed softly, thankful that she chose to hug him around the shoulders instead of the midsection.

"N-no." He just wanted to sleep. "I'm not hungry." He walked past her, scurrying to his bedroom. He pulled off his jacket, wincing in pain as his ribs ached at the movement. He sat down on his bed slowly.

Turning to lay down sideways, he grabbed his pillow and pressed his face against it. He didn't know how long he cried, but he definitely never remembered stopping.

--

"What do you think about going sledding?"

Jonathan picked his head up from his homework, staring at his father with wide eyes. It had been a few weeks now since the incident where Lonnie had hit him. He'd apologized, and Jonathan warily accepted. Maybe he'd done something wrong to earn such a beating and if his dad was sorry then maybe he could let it go.

"Sledding? Where?"

"I know a place," Lonnie said, grinning, "We can take your brother, I think he'd like it too."

Jonathan smiled. He'd never gone sledding before, "We don't have a sled," he told his father and he watched as Lonnie stood, making his way out of the kitchen and to the living room. Jonathan returned his eyes to his homework, answering a question from the little paragraph he had read.

"Jonathan."

He looked up and his eyes lit up.

Lonnie had a little toboggan sled leaned against his side. It was bright red in color, with black colored reigns. It was long enough that Jonathan could see that he and Will could easily sit on it at the same time.

“It’s ours?” Jonathan asked, abandoning his homework at the table and going to look at the sled. He touched it with careful fingertips and watched as Lonnie nodded.

“For you and your brother.”

And he’d had so much fun. Their dad had taken them to a part of Hawkins where the snow was steep enough to slide down and Jonathan could still hear Will’s excited laughter in his head each time they went down and slid along the snow.

They’d make snow angels...and his mother had taken pictures using a disposable camera...and when they’d gotten home, they’d had hot chocolate. It was fantastic.

“Can we do it again next weekend?” Will asked their father, the six-year olds cheeks were flushed from the cold and Jonathan cheered along with him when Lonnie nodded.

The next weekend, however, Will was sick.

Jonathan winced in sympathy, listening to his baby brother puke and sob into the toilet. He handed his mother a warm towel, watching as she cleaned Will’s face and the front of his shirt with it.

“Sweetie,” she turned to Jonathan, “Tell your father to go to the pharmacy to pick up something for Will,” she turned back to his brother, pulling the soiled shirt off, “and go with him, please? Make sure he doesn’t get sidetracked.”

“Okay, mom,” Jonathan turned around and walked out of the bathroom. After finding his dad, and explaining what his mom had requested, they were on their way towards the pharmacy.

Only...they weren’t going in the right direction at all. Jonathan

pointed this out to his father, who merely waved him off, stating, "I promised you we would go sledding again this weekend." It was actually Will who he promised it to.

"We're supposed to get Will medicine," Jonathan said, already feeling guilty as his dad pulled the sled out from back of the car. This didn't seem right. He didn't want to go sledding while his baby brother was back home puking his little guts out.

"It'll be quick," Lonnie insisted, voice level, "Just a few times down the hill with your old man and then we'll go right to the pharmacy to get him something to settle his stomach." He set the sled down and then ducked back into the car, grabbing a thermos.

"Here, drink this," his father said and Jonathan accepted the thermos, "It'll warm you up, it's so cold out here." And Jonathan drank. Whatever it was, it tasted kind of...odd.

--

When did he fall asleep?

Jonathan sat up, grabbing his head and groaning. He glanced around, realizing with a confused sound that he was no longer outside. He was inside of a musty building, the walls were cracked and it was really cold. There was no furniture, nothing to indicate that he was inside of a familiar place. There was only one door and it was lined with grime and the white-painted wood was chipped at the bottom.

He moved to stand and he shook his head, eyes closing tightly as he tried to process what was happening. He felt dizzy. What was happening? He heard the sound of footsteps approaching and he turned his head as the door opened.

Jonathan stumbled back as two unfamiliar figures walked into the room. They had oversized jackets, with the hoods up and black masks covering their faces. Why were they wearing masks? It was cold but no one in Hawkins wore masks like that when it snowed.

One of the men turned to the other and nodded his head and Jonathan felt his throat tighten in fear as they both began to walk in his

direction

He felt large hands grab onto his wrist, jerking his body back harshly. They slammed him back onto the floor and he whimpered in pain, too disoriented to fully react. Those fingers held him down against the floor and they were squeezing his wrists so hard...it hurt a lot.

“L-let me go!” he screamed but he was horrified to learn that his feeble attempts at moving were met with laughter as they merely pressed down harder and he could swear that the bones in his small wrists were close to breaking. The grinding...he could hear it in his ears.

“This is for your own good, Jonathan.” That voice. It was the only thing he recognized even through his hazy delirium.

“D-dad?” he whispered, struggling to lift his head. He felt a hand on the back of his neck, forcing his head down roughly. It was very uncomfortable, the hand was big and circled the entire back of his neck as it pushed down heavily. His chin tucked tight against his chest, he could see something glinting. A bottle. It was empty, the contents drained, and it pressed hard against his hip.

“This is what happens when you like boys, Jonathan.” His father’s voice echoed around his head and Jonathan flinched when he felt hands grab his pants. They pulled them down hard, nails scraping against his skin, and tugged them off of his legs.

What was happening? Who were these men holding him down and why was his father letting this happen? Why was he *helping* them do this? He didn’t understand and he began to cry, his eyes shutting tight.

He felt hands tug at his underwear and he kept his eyes shut tight as they were pulled down with the same roughness as his pants. He couldn’t stop his whimpers of fear as his legs were grabbed and he whined in pain as they were tugged apart harshly. He felt his bones creak as he was spread open, made to bend in a way that he was unused to.

Something hard and cold pressed against him in a place that he knew

no one should ever touch and his eyes opened, staring up at his father, “D-dad?” and Lonnie’s eyes darkened. Jonathan watched Lonnie lower the bottle and his eyes followed the movement, fear causing his breathing to labor. “Daddy, please...” he begged finally.

His plea was ignored.

A sudden burst of pain stabbed into his stomach and Jonathan screamed loudly, his head falling back and thumping against the floor hard as he felt a tearing down his body. The pain...it was so awful. The feeling of literally being ripped open and he continued his screeching even as his father stood. It felt like someone let a weight fall right onto his stomach and like he fell down on his bottom extremely hard.

Jonathan kicked his legs and struggled anew, trying in vain to rip his arms from the men holding him down. He felt the bottle scrape against the floor, jostling his insides, and he groaned in agony, tears streaming down his face like water coming out of a faucet.

“You’d better get used to this, boy.” Lonnie said, and through the tears blurring his vision, he could see the man standing with his arms crossed as he leaned against the wall, “because this is what men are going to do to you if you decide to be queer.”

“I’m sorry,” Jonathan sobbed, “W-whatever I did, daddy, I-I’m so sor-” before he could finish his apology, the ripping pain was back, but this time it was due to the bottle being snatched out of him. He kicked at the floor uselessly, broken breaths and loud sobs escaping his throat. It was beginning to hurt...screaming so much.

“You want to be a queer, don’t you?” Lonnie spoke again, his face devoid of any empathy, “I’m doing this for your own good, Jonathan. I’m showing you how bad it is to like boys.”

Jonathan shook his head, still sobbing, still in so much pain. He felt his wrists being manacled and he cracked his eyes open. The mark stared down at him and he jerked, terrified. He felt hands on his thighs, pulling them open.

No. Not more pain.

Jonathan felt a hand slip over his mouth and he shut his eyes tightly, feeling something foreign and heavy pressing against him again. It wasn't cold like the bottle had been. It was something warm but very firm and it was tearing inside of him roughly and he screamed against the palm over his mouth.

He felt so dizzy. He couldn't make sense of what was happening. Of why it was happening. What had he done wrong? If this was a lesson, what was he meant to learn? He cried weakly, feeling the man move inside of him, pushing deeper and deeper. His insides felt scraped and bruised. He was in so much pain.

The hands on his hips tightened and he tensed, feeling something gush inside of him. Whatever it was, there was too much of it and it slipped down his thighs to the floor. He could feel it sliding underneath his buttocks. The man moved away and Jonathan groaned, too sore to even move.

When the other man that had been holding his hands suddenly took up the same position as the man before, Jonathan just shut his eyes, continuing his quiet sobs as something was once again pressed into his unwillingly stretched out body.

He begged in his head to just fall asleep. To end all of this pain. To just fall asleep and never wake up again. He began to chant in his head, telling himself to just fall asleep...to fall asleep...to fall asleep...

He fell *asleep*.

--

He woke up again.

He was in his room this time. Jonathan stared at the familiar walls and then slowly turned his eyes towards the figure sitting at the edge of his bed. Fear had him frozen still and he stared, unmoving at his father.

"You're awake," Lonnie seemed relieved. "Are you okay?"

Was he okay? Jonathan didn't understand how he could even ask

such a thing.

He licked his dry lips, swallowing with some difficulty as he raised the sheets up higher, covering half of his face, "W-why did you do that?" Jonathan asked, his entire body shaking as he peeked through his sheets, "W-why did you hurt me, dad?" his voice was so raspy, it irritated his throat to talk. His own screaming rang in his head and he stared at his dad, afraid.

"What are you talking about, son?" Lonnie asked, his face confused, "Did you have a nightmare?" he frowned, "You've been sleeping for quite a while. It must have taken a lot out of you." He looked down at his watch.

Jonathan stared. What? "N-no...you *hurt* me. Y-you..." It was so vivid in his mind. He felt the large hands holding him down...felt the way the cold bottle pressed against him and tore into his body...he could *still* feel it.

He could still feel *them* pushing inside of his opened body...making disgusting noises above him...pressing him down with big hands into the floor...all they did after his own father had let them.

"Son," Lonnie looked hurt, "I would never hurt you. Are you alright? You fell and hit your head on that tree while we were sledding but I thought letting you sleep it off would be best. I'm sorry if you had a nightmare. Can you see how many fingers I'm holding up?" he raised a hand and Jonathan shook his head.

What was happening? Lonnie seemed so sincere. Was it possible? Had he imagined what had happened? Had he *dreamt* such a terrible thing?

Jonathan shifted on the bed and he cried out in pain, his lower half protesting any sudden movement. It felt like he got punched in the stomach over and over again for an hour. No...the pain. The pain was there. There was no way he could have imagined-

"You slid for a long time," Lonnie said, frowning, "I tried to catch you but you were slipping down so fast. Your body must be so sore."

He was sore. He was in so much pain. But...but why did he feel pain in...

“D-did I fall on my bottom?” he whispered, embarrassed, “I’m really hurting down...down there.” His throat ached so much. He stroked it, feeling out of place and so lost. Why was he so confused?

“Probably,” Lonnie shrugged and he handed Jonathan a mug, “I couldn’t reach you in time. When I did get to you, you were unconscious and I put you in the car. We still had to get the medicine for Will so I left you in the car to sleep while I picked it up.”

Jonathan stared at the mug and took it but he made no move to drink. He set it down on his nightstand and closed his eyes with a whimper. Why did he have no sense of time? Why was he still feeling so confused? Was it possible that...that what had happened...

He looked up as the door opened and he lit up at the sight of his mother. She was carrying Will on her hip and they were both looking at him, concerned. He held his arms out for her, whining and she immediately sat on his bed, Will adjusting himself on her lap to make room for Jonathan to lay his head.

“Your father told me what happened,” Joyce said softly, “do you remember anything?”

He remembered a lot. But...was it real?

What if it wasn’t? What if he really did fall and smack into a tree? Would he be lying? Accusing his father of doing such a thing when it was probably just a nightmare he had due to the accident while sledding? His dad seemed so honest...so hurt.

“I remember the sled,” Jonathan murmured, hiding his face in her lap. “Dad pulled out the sled. He said it was only going to be a little while and that we would go get Will some medicine.” He glanced at his brother, seeing wide brown eyes staring at him, “I’m sorry that we took so long...I’m sorry that I fell.”

“Don’t be silly,” Joyce said, stroking his hair gently, “Do you feel like you have any broken bones?” she looked to Lonnie, “Should we go to

the hospital?"

Lonnie shook his head, "If he had any broken bones, he would be screaming. He probably just needs a lot of bed-rest to get rid of the soreness." He grabbed the mug, hanging it to Jonathan again. "Drink, it'll help your throat. Your mom made it."

"What's wrong with his voice? Why is it so hoarse?" Joyce asked, helping Jonathan drink from the warm mug.

"He screamed a lot on the way down," Lonnie said and Jonathan caught his father's eye. "He must have been so afraid."

If what his father was saying was true...why did he feel such dread?

--

Jonathan opened his eyes slowly.

Steve had been quiet the entire time. There would be moments when he would squeeze Jonathan's knee, stroke his hand, even stroked his cheek but he'd been absolutely silent.

He turned his head and swallowed hard.

Steve had his head lowered, both hands covering his face. He sat up slowly, dragging them down his face without a sound. He stood, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Steve?" Jonathan whispered.

Without a word, Steve moved his way to the bedroom door and Jonathan could feel his heart beginning to break. Was Steve going to leave him? He watched with wide eyes as Steve removed his hands, raised his fist and slammed it against the wall besides the door.

"Jesus," he stood up, reaching the older male and grabbing his hand. He winced in sympathy, seeing the broken skin on the knuckles. He kissed the skin softly, "Why did you-" he felt Steve pull his hand away and then he exhaled a burst of air as he was pulled into a tight embrace.

He felt himself trembling but it wasn't him that the shaking was coming from. *Steve* was shaking. His shoulders were quivering so hard that he was rocking Jonathan with the motion and Jonathan swallowed hard, feeling wetness drip onto his neck.

Steve was *crying*.

Notes for the Chapter:

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Okay, I'm going to end it there. The next chapter goes more into the gaslighting that Lonnie put Jonathan through and the way Jonathan realized that what happened to him was real, and his eventual understanding that liking males is *NOT* the way his father tried to make him believe.

For those who didn't catch it, Jonathan's realization was that he had very deep feelings for Steve. He knows that he's in love but he is too afraid of Steve's reaction to his feelings. The fact that he was touched by Steve and didn't once feel any hint of fear was huge for him as the next chapter will show that he felt weary even of Eric.

Gaslighting is a really sick and horrible thing to do to someone. I have a friend who was a victim of narcissist parents who *STILL* try to gaslight her even now that she's got her own life and family. It is truly disgusting and I had her sort of steer me in the right direction to write it.

This had a lot more written in originally but I didn't like the flow so I crunched in the most important parts. I hope you'll forgive any grammar accidents as this literally took a long time to get typed out (I write in journals and then transfer), but I hope the beginning of this chapter made you guys happy.

I'm sure the second half just made you guys sad and

for that I apologize. Our poor boys.

10. So I Proved To You That You Didn't Have to Fear Me

Notes for the Chapter:

As before, Jonathan's memory will start with an italicized letter.

Warning- Some gas-lighting, a bit of blood, and Lonnie just being the worst parent ever.

--

The soft fingers stroking the back of his neck was nice, but it wasn't taking away any of the heartache burrowing a hole in his chest. Steve dug his palms into his eyes; his fingers curling tightly as he felt soft lips kiss drop a kiss on his shoulder.

"Jesus, Jonathan," Steve whispered, his voice breaking. He swallowed hard, licking his lips as he tried to shake the red out of his vision. He wanted to *maim* that sick son of a bitch. That asshole better be rotting in the hell he deserved. "I...how do you even let me near you?"

His knuckles were throbbing with pain. Jonathan had ducked into the kitchen to grab some ice, hurrying to Steve's side and wrapping his hand up with the ice-filled rag. It soothed the cracked skin a little bit but damn did it hurt.

That was nothing though. So his knuckles were a little but bruised. So what? It was nothing, not a damn thing compares to what had happened to his boy. Jonathan was strong. He was so, so strong. More than anyone should ever have to be. To have gone through such an ordeal but still be so open.

Only...

He hadn't been open. Jonathan was closed off for such a long time. Hadn't been touched for such a long time...and God, he had *every* reason to be afraid. He had every reason to cringe, to flinch, to

suddenly freak out if touched...

"Eric," Steve said flatly, staring at the wall with narrowed eyes, "That asshole. Calling you tainted, making you think you don't deserve to be touched," he grit his teeth, his entire body vibrating with fury.

Lonnie was dead. There was nothing that Steve could do to change that, even though he wished with all of his heart that he could have the fucker meet the business end of his heaviest aluminum bat.

But Steve could still find Eric to make him pay for his part in prolonging Jonathan's fear and pain. A broken nose would be the least of that scumbag's worries. How fucking dare he? How *dare* he be a light in Jonathan's life and then just shroud him in more darkness with his words? Betraying Jonathan when he'd told him something so personal.

"I'm so sorry," Steve said quietly, "I...I pressed too hard. I pushed myself into your life and I never ever understood why you were so scared-

"Stop," Jonathan said softly from behind him, "Don't you ever-don't confuse what I feel for you. I trust you. I am not afraid of you."

Steve didn't trust himself to speak. Christ, just a few days ago he had basically dry-fucked the younger man in this very bed. He had wanted to do more. Was Jonathan even okay with that? Did Jonathan even *want* that?

He sighed shakily, feelings hands on his cheeks. He stared into Jonathan's face, unable to stop the tears slipping down his cheeks. He felt those fingers collect at the salty trails and he closed his eyes as Jonathan's lips gently touched at his moist cheek.

Steve's arms wrapped around Jonathan and he eased them back onto the bed. Jonathan rested on top of him, his chin positioned on Steve's chest, as he waited. Steve thought about his earlier words carefully.

"How did...how did he get away with making you think it never happened?"

"It's called gaslighting," Jonathan said quietly, "I didn't know the

term for it until I read about it in my psychology class. He...he made me think I was crazy. That I imagined it all. He was very convincing," he smiled; sadly, "He had me believe it was all in my head for *months*."

"How did you find out?" Steve whispered.

Jonathan closed his eyes for a few moments and when he opened them, they were narrowed. "When he and my mom divorced when I was eleven, he would come around to take Will out every couple of weeks..."

-Five Years Ago-

"I don't like going out with dad."

Jonathan turned away from the stove, glancing back at his younger brother. Will was still wearing his dark jeans and the green shirt he had pulled on to go out with Lonnie earlier. Jonathan had been invited, but the older Byers denied the invitation, his gut twisting at the thought of being out with his father for reasons he didn't even understand.

Instead, he opted to stay home and prepare dinner for his mother and Will for when they got back. Lonnie had given him a disapproving frown, muttered some words about cooking being a woman's duty, and then left with Will.

They'd been gone for about two hours and then Will was walking in through the front door, the sound of tires pulling away causing Jonathan to exhale loudly in relief. He smiled at Will, asking him about his time out as the smaller boy sat at the table.

But now, hearing Will's words bothered him and Jonathan turned his head back to the pot, stirring carefully with the long wooden spoon, "Why not? He took you to the arcade, didn't he?"

"Sure," Will murmured, "But he took me to the woods first. He tried to make me hold a gun."

Jonathan dropped the wooden spoon.

Whirling around to face Will, he stared hard at him, face ashen, “He what?”

“I didn’t touch it,” Will said quickly, startled by Jonathan’s volume, “I told him that mom wouldn’t like it. He was upset but he took me to the arcade after that. It just made me feel weird, him trying to get me to hold it. He called me a weird name when I told him that I wouldn’t take it.”

“What did he call you?” Jonathan asked, ice creeping into his veins.

“**Queer**,” Will wrinkled his nose, the eight year old confused, “What’s a queer, Jonathan?”

Jonathan couldn’t answer. He stared at his baby brother, at his innocent expression, big brown eyes so full of wonder and child-like curiosity, small form swinging his legs as he sat at the kitchen table...

Slowly, Jonathan turned back around, staring down at the soup. He felt his throat tighten and he closed his eyes as memories began to assault his mind. He shook his head hard, trying to force the images away.

Quietly, trying to keep his voice calm, he talked to Will again, “Has Lonnie hurt you, Will? Has he hit you?”

“N-no.”

Jonathan felt his shoulders sag in relief, “Don’t go with him,” he murmured, “if he...if you don’t want to go and he tries to force you to, you tell me. You tell me and I’ll make sure he doesn’t take you anywhere.”

“Okay,” Will was quiet for a few seconds and then he asked meekly, “Can I color?”

“Of course,” Jonathan said immediately, grabbing the spoon and stirring again. He heard footsteps rush out of the kitchen and he gripped the spoon harder, his mind unfortunately unwilling to let him bury his memories.

He woke up bleeding the next morning.

Jonathan stared at the red stain on his bed-sheets, mortified. He reached behind him to pat at his behind, feeling it sticky and wet, and he quickly snatched off his pajama pants and gathered his linens.

After going into the bathroom and washing up, Jonathan tugged on a new pair of underwear and pants and then shoved his bed-sheets into the tub. He nervously turned the knob for hot water again and watched the small rivers of red from the linens glide down the sink.

“What are you doing, son?”

Jonathan jumped and turned, his knees hitting the rim of the tub, and he flailed. A strong arm caught his wrist and Jonathan stared up at Lonnie, face pale.

The older man was staring down at him with an eyebrow raised, and then he looked towards the tub. He saw the stained sheets and he slowly flitted his gaze back to Jonathan.

“I-I’m bleeding,” Jonathan whispered, “b-back there. Where...where they...” he didn’t want to continue as he noticed his father’s eyes narrowing.

“They?” Lonnie huffed, “Who is “they”, Jonathan? You just had an accident. This is probably from the fall; you must have raked up your backside pretty badly.”

It was from the fall? But...but why did...

“I don’t understand, daddy,” Jonathan whispered honestly, terrified, “W-what happened to me?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lonnie grunted, leaning over to clean the bed-sheets, “I’ll take care of this son, you must still be so sore after the fall.”

Jonathan **was** sore. He could feel so much pain still.

“It’s best we keep this to ourselves,” Lonnie said, turning to look Jonathan in the eyes, “We don’t want to worry your mother, do we?”

Mommy...

"She has to work all day, Jonathan. If you worry her, she won't get any sleep and she'll be so tired during the day. How will she get any work done?"

His mother would lose sleep to worry over him...

Jonathan looked to the ground guiltily. "Okay, daddy," he whispered, "I won't say anything." He felt a heavy hand fall on his head and he flinched, not liking the comforting pat at all.

"That's my good **boy**."

--

The nightmares began soon after.

They always started similarly, him walking around an unfamiliar building and then he would suddenly be grabbed by faceless monsters. They were big, and covered in shadows, with cold hands and harsh grips.

There would be pain. So much pain. It would tear at his insides like the world's worst tummy ache, it would feel like fire burning away his insides, like his entire body was being pressed down into a bed of sharp needles...such severe pain.

He remembered the way he would wake up from his nightmares of phantom hands attacking him, holding him down and forcing him open. He remembered waking up screaming until his voice went broke off, how Lonnie would always be the first one at his bed.

"You've been watching too many damn movies!" Lonnie had screamed, pacing Jonathan's room with Joyce trying to console a frightened Will next door, "You're literally dreaming up movies now!"

"But I remember it!" he had screamed, tears making a path down his face, "I remember!"

"What do you remember, Jonathan?" Lonnie seethed, hands on his

hips, “That stupid movie you watched when you were eight?!”

Jonathan stared back up at his father, chin trembling, “N-no, I...” he stared down at his wrinkled bed-sheets, bringing his hands up to his throbbing temples. What if it **was** a movie he was remembering?

He would get into so much trouble for fibbing about something that had never happened. His mom would be so disappointed in him.

“No more scary movies,” Lonnie said tightly, and Jonathan nodded wearily, “Good. Now go to sleep.” He moved towards the door, slapping Jonathan’s light off as he went.

Surrounded by darkness once more, Jonathan stared down at his lap. Why was it so clear in his head? Why did he feel everything? Remember so much? Why was it so vivid if it was just a **dream**?

-Present-

Steve stroked Jonathan’s cheek, staring down at him silently.

“I was afraid for Will,” Jonathan said softly, “I was afraid that Lonnie would...would do something to him. He started calling him a queer all the time and anytime he would sneer at Will or call him that name, I would remember more and more. He wasn’t around as often, he couldn’t gaslight me anymore,” he smiled bitterly, “he couldn’t manipulate my memories and I remembered *everything*.”

Steve closed his eyes, his arms wrapping around Jonathan’s shoulders. He felt the smaller man’s head move, cheek pressed against his chest and he sighed heavily, certain that Jonathan could hear his heart cracking open, bleeding out.

They lay in silence for a while, Steve caressing Jonathan’s hair gently. He narrowed his eyes at the ceiling, “Does your mother know?”

“Of course not,” Jonathan said softly, “it would...it would kill her to find out. She saw it, back when I was younger. I know that she noticed a change but I deflected any of her concerns as best as I was able to. It wasn’t until Lonnie drank himself stupid and killed himself in a ditch that I was able to just let go of all my fear. I knew he

wouldn't ever be able to hurt me or manipulate me ever again."

"Are you ever going to tell her?"

Steve watched Jonathan's eyes lower and he gently continued, "I'm not telling you to. I was only...I would want to know. If I ever had a kid and something like this..." he sighed hard, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip, "then again, I'd probably end up in jail for murdering anyone involved..."

Jonathan nodded, "Maybe I will tell her one day. You know and you're still letting me touch you so that's enough...it's enough for me."

"I want to hurt him, Jonathan," Steve said seriously, and when Jonathan blinked at him, he elaborated, "Eric. For making you think you were dirty. For learning this about you and then making it seem as if it was your fault."

Jonathan didn't say anything and Steve reached out, grabbing onto both of his hands and pressing them over his chest, so that the smaller man could feel his heart, "You know that I am not lying to you. You *know* it. Tell me that you believe me when I say that you're not tainted." He kept one of his hands over Jonathan's and slung his other arm over tensed shoulders, "Tell me, Jonathan."

Jonathan sighed, his forehead falling down to hide his face and Steve gripped him tighter, "Baby, please, lie to me if you have to." Even if it was a lie, which would really suck, he still needed to at least hear Jonathan say it. To at least hear the words come from that sweet mouth.

"No," Jonathan murmured, slowly picking his head back up, "It's not that I don't believe you, Steve. I do. But it," he shook his head, "it's going to take me a while to...to fully get used to it."

"But you do believe me?" Steve pressed, as gently as he could, "You do know that you're not dirty. You know that, right?"

"I do," Jonathan confirmed, leaning up to press a small kiss to Steve's quivering jaw, "I do know it." He smiled, reaching up to stroke his

thumb over Steve's bottom lip, "Thank you so much."

"For what?" Steve hadn't done anything, *I'm still going to find that son of a bitch and break more than his nose*, but here was Jonathan, staring at him with all the love in the world. *Love*.

"For being here," Jonathan whispered, "for not turning me away. For caring so much and being so fucking patient. It means the entire world to me. I don't know," he swallowed hard, eyes closing, "I don't know what I would have done...what would have happened to me if you...if you'd..." his voice trailed off, heavy with emotion.

"Never," Steve whispered heatedly, sitting up just so that he could wrap his arms around Jonathan and drag him into his lap. He closed his arms around the slender waist, his hands gripping the material of Jonathan's top tightly, "Thank you so much for trusting me," he murmured, feeling Jonathan nuzzling into his neck, hot tears slipping onto his skin, "thank you, babe."

--

"Hey," Hopper said, glancing up from his newspaper and Jonathan smiled sleepily at the man, giving him a little wave, "Your mom took the kids with her to pick up some pizza, they should be back any minute now. Is Steve in your room?"

"He's sleeping," Jonathan nodded, plopping himself down onto the couch besides Hopper. He yawned into his fist, still quite drowsy himself. Steve was completely asleep, hopefully dreaming of nice things back in his room, but drudging up the memories always made Jonathan weary of sleep.

"Are you okay?" Hopper asked, setting his newspaper aside. "You look very tired."

"I will be," Jonathan answered honestly, "I know that I will be." He rubbed the back of his neck, "I am so glad that I don't have to work tonight."

Hopper smirked, "You said it." They both turned their heads at the sound of the door opening and then Eleven and Will were walking

towards the kitchen, a separate pizza box in both of their arms.

Joyce followed along, carrying a liter of pop. She smiled as she saw them, “Hi, honey,” she said to Jonathan, “is Steve here? Tell him to come and eat while it’s hot.”

Jonathan smiled and stood up, making his way back to his room. He closed the door quietly behind him and crawled onto his bed, creeping up beside his sleeping King. He reached out, gently running his fingers through Steve’s hair, “Hey,” he whispered.

“Hm?” Steve hummed, turning his head towards those stroking fingers. His eyes opened slowly, and he blinked sleepily up at Jonathan, “What is it, babe?” he murmured, eyes closing as he burrowed his head into Jonathan’s lap.

“Mom brought a pie,” Jonathan said softly, letting his fingers trace Steve’s facial features, “Do you want to go eat? We haven’t had a proper meal yet.”

“Food is good,” Steve mumbled as he slowly sat up. He stretched and Jonathan winced as he listened to the muscles in the older boy’s back pop. “Did you sleep at all?”

“No,” Jonathan admitted, standing, “I’ll take a nap after we eat-” his words were cut short as Steve sat up on his knees, slowly turning to wrap his arms around Jonathan’s mid-section. He rested his head against Jonathan’s chest and the blonde smiled softly, his own hands coming up to cradle Steve’s head.

“We will take a nap after we eat,” Steve corrected, voice muffled against the material of Jonathan’s shirt, “A good three hour nap.”

“That’s not a nap,” Jonathan said playfully, his fingers playing with Steve’s sleep-mussed hair, “My naps are usually only around half an hour to forty-five minutes.”

“Dreadful,” Steve murmured, but he was smiling when he pulled his head back to stare up at Jonathan. Staring down into those warm brown eyes, staring up at him so lovingly, and those lips grinning up at him...

Jonathan moved his hands to Steve's cheeks and he leaned down, sighing softly before his lips fell over Steve's. He stroked the soft skin beneath his fingertips as he kissed gently at the full bottom lip, feeling Steve's hands on his hips.

They fell back against the bed, simply holding one another and kissing slowly. Steve's hand gripped his thigh, pulling him closer to his body and Jonathan went, pressing himself as closely as he could to the older boy.

He pulled back slowly, his nose gently bumping against Steve's. He felt those long fingers rubbing his lower back and he smiled, opening his eyes and moving his head back a bit to stare into Steve's gentle look.

"You're beautiful," Steve said, voice soft and honest, and Jonathan couldn't stop his smile even if he wanted to, "You're so damn lovely," the older boy sighed happily, head shaking, "and I am so damn lucky to love you."

Love.

Jonathan stared down at Steve, eyes widening. His heart...oh, god, his heart. It was beating in overtime, feeling like it was growing with each beat. He could feel his eyes watering and he blinked rapidly, trying to smile through his emotion at Steve's suddenly distraught face.

"What? What is it?" Steve sat them up, his hands reaching up to push Jonathan's bangs away from his face, "Babe, what-" he grunted softly as Jonathan threw his arms tightly around his body.

Jonathan shut his eyes, a soft bubble of laughter escaping his throat. He heard a knock on his door and he hid his face against Steve's neck at Eleven's quiet voice.

"Jonathan? Are you okay?"

He chuckled, feeling her small hands touching his back. He eased back, wiping his eyes with his sleeve and smiling over at her concerned doe gaze, "I'm fantastic, El," he said honestly, "I'm the

best I have ever been.”

And she smiled brightly at him, “I’m really glad,” she said happily, “Now, let’s go eat! Will and papa are stealing all the cheese pizza!”

“Heathens!” Steve cried out, hopping out of bed. He wrapped an arm around Jonathan, dragging him out of the bed easily before smiling down at Eleven, “lead the way, princess!”

And Jonathan couldn’t help but lean over one more time, pressing a gentle kiss to Steve’s smiling cheek, “I don’t deserve you,” he murmured.

“Hell, I know that,” Steve drawled, tugging Jonathan along as they moved behind Eleven, “You deserve a lot better than me,” he winked playfully at Jonathan, “sucks for you, Byers, but I’ve already told you. I am not letting you go.”

Jonathan’s heart, so ready to be broken and killed before this all began, was beating more life into his body than it ever had.

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“How did you know that you liked boys?”

Steve furrowed his brows at the question, using his leg to lazily swing the porch swing he and Jonathan were sitting on in the front yard of the Byers household. They stared out into the setting sun, Jonathan’s legs popped up on Steve’s lap, with the older boy gently strumming his fingers over the blonde’s knee.

“I was in fourth grade, I think,” Steve murmured, tilting his head, “I got paired up with his boy who was a new student. I don’t remember his name, but I remember thinking that he had a really nice smile. Anyway, we were doing a project and he moves to grab the glue when I do and our hands touched.” He smiled lightly at Jonathan’s laugh, “My dad always told me that when you like someone you feel a spark for them.”

“Did you feel the spark?”

Steve shook his head, “Nah, guess I was too young. I did think he was

cute, though,” he sighed, “I didn’t feel any sort of spark until Billy.” He snorted, “It was a small-time fizz, though.” He listened to Jonathan hum, “What about you?”

“I was snooping through my mom’s magazines from high school once and I found a spread on James Dean,” Jonathan mumbled and Steve whistled, snickering at the dry look he received, “and there was this character in *Halloween*...I don’t even remember his name but I found him attractive.”

“I really hope you’re not talking about that dorky guy with the glasses,” Steve teased, grinning widely at the blush on Jonathan’s cheeks, “because while I can admit that James Dean is attractive, that guy from *Halloween* is definitely not.”

“Shut up,” Jonathan grinned, shaking his head, “Anyway...after what happened I kind of tried to get rid of any feelings I had for guys. I was just too scared the more and more I remembered. I kept thinking that maybe it would happen again with someone I actually liked and I...I didn’t know how to handle it.”

Steve listened, his head nodding, “How...how did you get over that?” he asked softly, “How did you know that it wouldn’t be that way?”

Jonathan smiled, his eyes looking back out to the horizon. “Do you remember those corny little Valentines we used to give out in middle school?”

Steve smirked, “Boy, do I. I got one from every girl in the school, even the girls in the grades higher than me.”

Jonathan snorted, “Of course you did.” He smiled faintly, “Well, I only ever got one.” The wind picked up a bit, sweeping his fringe into his eyes, “It was from a boy, his name was Michael and we were in the seventh grade.” He brushed away his bangs, “He gave me a little card and there was a little baggie of those nasty little hearts to go along with them...”

“Conversation Hearts,” Steve remembered and he smiled as Jonathan nodded.

“He said that I was the only one he gave the candy to because he liked my voice and the way I read in class. He was moving the next month or something, but he wanted to make sure to tell me. I got home and my mom asked me how my day went and I showed her the card and candy.”

Jonathan’s voice was gentle and Steve rubbed the denim-clad leg slowly.

“She was so happy. It was my first Valentine. Ever.” He glanced down at Steve’s hand, reaching out for it. Steve linked their fingers at once. “I mentioned to her that it was from a boy...and then I apologized to her.”

“She was so confused by me apologizing,” Jonathan murmured, “she asked why I would think it was wrong to get a Valentines from a boy...and then I told her that Lonnie would say that boys aren’t supposed to like boys, that it was wrong, all that. She was so fired up. She cursed his name up and down even though he wasn’t around anymore.”

“Shame,” Steve mumbled, “Wish I got to do more than just curse his damn name.”

Jonathan squeezed his hand briefly, “Mom sat me and Will down and explained to us that there was absolutely nothing wrong with liking boys. She went over it in such a loving manner...she was so gentle and so patient...and she completely changed my perspective on it, and then Eric-”

“Yeah, fuck him.” Steve immediately said, that low gurgle in his chest rising.

“Yes,” Jonathan agreed, smiling, “but before he...” he sighed, “He was sweet with me. Tender. I wasn’t ever afraid of him until he would try to take things further. I would stop him each time and at least he always backed off.” He frowned, “Not that it mattered, in the end.”

Steve shifted, swinging them a bit more, “And with me?” he murmured, suddenly feeling a bit unsure, “Do you...do you get afraid

with me? When I'm a bit too aggressive?"

"Never," Jonathan said, voice soft and sincere, "I don't feel any bit of fear and there is no hesitation with you." He chuckled, "I mean, I'm sure you felt how excited I was that morning. If Will hadn't been home," his eyes, dark and passionate, stared straight at him, "I don't really know if I would have stopped you. Maybe just because I would have wanted you to know about everything first...but not because I was afraid." He leaned closer to Steve, "and I was right to not be afraid."

Steve raised Jonathan's warm hand to his lips, kissing the top of his hand lightly. "I'm glad," he whispered, voice carried by the wind, "I'm glad that you're not afraid of me."

"How can I be?" Jonathan whispered back, his thumb tracing Steve's palm, "How could I possibly fear the man that I love?"

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Notes for the Chapter:

Twooooooo more chapters left, guys.

I'm sorry I disappeared on this for a little bit but Stonathan week is over and I can fully invest in this again. I had so much fun writing that week but I've missed this and weekly updates will commence.

Thank you all for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting! I wish I could reply to all of you but I have the worst memory sometimes and just don't remind myself to respond but please know that I appreciate ALL of you.